

Cape crusader

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A growing chorus of black leaders led by Noel Pearson says: Get off the grog, break the welfare cycle and create real jobs

ALONG the coastline of Cape York Peninsula stretch about 15 small indigenous communities: many of them troubled, alcohol-plagued, mired in social crisis. Yet it is there that a revolution in Aboriginal thinking has been born and may soon be carried through -- a revolution in the way indigenous society thinks of itself, its economic goals and its relations with the rest of Australia.

In a week when former Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation chair Pat Dodson put aside the demand for a federal government apology to indigenous people and called for more Aboriginal leaders to enter mainstream politics, a new mood in Australia's relations with its first peoples is crystallising. Federal and State leaders are responding eagerly to the indigenous voices exploring the idea of a new compact: constructive engagement, not political confrontation; less dependency, more self-empowerment.

Meanwhile, in the run-up to a path-setting summit in Cape York next month, an indigenous leader, perhaps for the first time, is offering Aborigines an explanation of why they are where they are and concrete steps towards a better future.

The ambitions outlined in a new blueprint by the Cape York Land Council's Noel Pearson are great: in place of welfare, real jobs; in place of familial chaos, respect for old traditions; in place of violence and exploitation, mutual obligation and responsibility.

Is all this any more than just fine words? Certainly the initial reaction from those who oversee Aboriginal affairs has been positive. Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Herron ``totally supports'' Pearson's goals. Queensland Premier Peter Beattie and his Minister for Aboriginal Policy, Judy Spence, have been quick to applaud and offer practical help. For Queensland's top indigenous policy bureaucrat, Kerrie Tim, ``what Noel Pearson 's talking about is just vital -- there has to be an ideal or vision, or we just give in to despair''.

Almost the only dissenting voices have come from those out at the coalface, delivering government services to the Cape, who complain that the structures needed to achieve change are already in place and Pearson's ideas are overly dogmatic.

But what, exactly, are those ideas? The most surreal aspect of the attention given to Pearson's plan is that few people have read his full paper, titled *Our Right to Take Responsibility* -- nor will they until its release after next month's meeting of Cape York communities.

Much debate in Queensland and among Aboriginal leaders nationwide has focused on quotes taken out of context. Rarely has a text unseen generated such heat.

In fact, Pearson's thinking is in line with that of many traditional Aboriginal leaders who have begun speaking out against the corrosions of the dependency culture. He is influenced, too, by Labor backbencher Mark Latham's book *Civilising Global Capital*, which challenges welfarism. But, above all, Pearson's views dovetail deliberately and intriguingly with the federal Government's emerging social agenda for indigenous Australia.

For Pearson, a product of the Lutheran Hope Vale community who celebrated his 34th birthday last week, the blueprint marks a new turn. After playing a leading part in the Aboriginal political response to the High Court's Mabo and Wik rulings, lengthy negotiations with mining companies, and a spell as chair of the Cape York Land Council, his latest incarnation is as economic thinker and social philosopher at large.

"Our society today," says Pearson in his paper, "is clearly unsuccessful." Welfare, he argues, has directly undermined Aboriginal law, and is a "disastrous con", a fraudulent excuse for an economy.

More than this, the welfare culture has distorted traditional patterns of obligation and reciprocity. Dependency brings passiveness: there is a narrowness about the ideas of Aboriginal identity alive today, and a failure by communities to seize the prospects offered by new technology.

What to do? Set up an indigenous business institute, says Pearson, engage in the real economy. If a community has revenues from mining, then invest them and maintain a capital stream. Embrace training, take the jobs on local projects. Gain skills and provide them to users in the wider world. Within the communities, develop an "internal modern subsistence economy". Replace today's lacklustre Community Development Employment Program -- the work-for-the-dole schemes in communities -- with programs based on true reciprocity, in which workers make a genuine contribution.

For the economic is the social, says Pearson. Change its workings and you will change social reality.

Yet despite the horrific problems on the Cape, Pearson says there remains a structural apathy: "Trying to change things in the communities seems so much harder than anywhere else. It's like walking on Jupiter. The gravity weighing down on personal and collective actions is so much greater. A pall of ennui engulfs communities."

Much like Noel Pearson, his brother Gerhardt, head of the Cape York Development Association, Balkanu, believes the current system in remote Aboriginal communities is now utterly bankrupt. The health system, education, services, the welfare programs -- they make up a perfect dependency trap.

"When I grew up," Gerhardt Pearson says, "I saw a lot of very proud Aboriginal men and women, no matter how hard and controlled life was then. Slowly but surely we've seen a deterioration. We weren't given responsibility. We've been dependent for so long and it hasn't worked for us. In the 10 years since ATSIC's been around, billions

of dollars have been spent and we've maybe seen a slight improvement in essential services. When we look at that and compare the alcohol problems and mortality rates, we're now asking: Is there something wrong with the system of government funding and policy? We're tired of going to funerals every week, of our children being sick. The system's wrong."

Gerhardt Pearson says the people of Cape York are quite prepared, in their bid to change their lives, to take on those whose care keeps them dependant -- governments, the "Aboriginal industry", the "ATSIC industry".

"We are talking about fundamental changes," he says. "We are talking about a reformation."

The same fire animates Kerry Arabena, the impassioned Islander who runs Apunipima, the Cape York Health Council. Not only is the time now, she says; now is the last chance. "Situation critical, we've got three to five years," Arabena says.

Life expectancy on Cape York is 20 years below the national average. Alcoholism is endemic. Family violence, sexual violence, sexually transmitted diseases -- these are the real-world symptoms of the welfare culture. The time has come, argues Arabena, to rethink from the ground up what it means to be an indigenous person in remote Australia: "We need a culture of nurtured success, of reclaimed dignity and reciprocal responsibility."

SHE is unsure, though, how even to think of the future when the sexual health of the communities is so devastated and welfare has made people "so short-term, thinking of two weeks, not 10 years". Her answer: proceed step by small step, with health checks, education programs, counselling, mobile medical clinics.

A co-ordinated plan, then, not just of economic restructuring but of emotional and social therapy is in mind as this new generation of indigenous leaders moves on from the realms of politics, legal rights and native title, and turns to the fundamental themes of life.

But how do things seem on the Cape? Take Lockhart River, a community of 500 people with a thriving new arts centre, a star young painter, Rozella Namok, and a brand-new \$900,000 women's refuge complete with 22 beds and a barbed-wire perimeter fence. Three young men have committed suicide here since the start of the year. Only four pupils went on to secondary school in 1998. The mood is heavy. Cards are played, and drink is drunk; just out of sight, deep undercurrents swirl.

At the tip of the Cape lie five communities with different characters and prospects. The tourist-rich Torres Strait Islander community of Seisia, dominated by business dynamo Joseph Elu, has moved so fast down the road of economic development it will have no more CDEP programs by the end of this year. Meanwhile, a few kilometres away off the main tourist road, the transplanted community of New Mapoon moulders, unvisited by tourists, in silence. The lesson is clear: that local conditions, leadership, good fortune and communal attitudes can have a profound effect on outcomes.

On the western Cape, at Aurukun, the centre of the Wik people, town clerk Gary Kleidon is disarmingly candid: "We'd be telling lies if we didn't say the education situation is pretty grim, there'd be children round here who've hardly ever been near a school. Our attempts at apprenticeships have been a disaster, CDEP is seen here as welfare, not as a job."

He leads on through the smart new canteen where, at 10am, a bacchanalian scene is unfolding.

"Welfare hasn't worked or solved any problems," says town mayor Jonathan Korkatain. "There's a breakdown of discipline among young children, that's what we older people believe, no one can control the younger generation. They've got welfare, and they've got no respect for anyone or anything."

Further down the coast lies Kowanyama, a lush oasis where the kitehawks soar and the women and children march in the street against domestic violence.

"There's too much alcohol," says one senior woman who wants, for obvious reasons, to stay anonymous. "Underage children are drinking, young mothers come back with their children from hospital in Cairns and go straight into the pub."

From the nearby canteen raised on the foundations of the old church come the sounds of Jimi Hendrix. "Deep in my heart, I feel Kowanyama should change -- the alcohol is too much for us, we are losing our culture today," the old woman says.

A message from the grassroots -- heard all too well, and now being met with an activist prescription. Among Cape York leaders there is a sense that a rare opportunity is in the offing -- that out of chaos could rise something grand.

"We have a real chance," says Cape York Land Council chair Richie Ah Mat, "to show the Australian public and ourselves that we can become economically sustainable, and get ourselves back on track."

But can the Pearson plan be converted from a grand display of intellect into a realistic scheme for reviving remote Aboriginal communities? Is it a significant blueprint -- not just for Cape York but Australia-wide?

A special summit on the plan, called with striking responsiveness by Queensland Premier Peter Beattie and bringing together ministers, indigenous and business leaders, will be held next month. For the first time in a generation, it seems new thinking about Aboriginal society has emerged hand in hand with the political will to break today's destructive, long-established cycles of dependency.