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## The man in the middle

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*Aboriginal lawyer Noel Pearson took Premier Peter Beattie to Cape York last week to hear a request for Aborigines to reject social welfare. Tony Koch reports*

AN ELDERLY black woman and her three-year-old grandson attended last week's gathering of elders and traditional owners at Wujal Wujal community south of Cooktown.

They were not intrusive. He was the youngest member of the Aurukun dancers who performed a welcome for Premier Peter Beattie on Saturday afternoon.

Although his grandmother also danced and listened to many of the speeches, she could often be found sitting in the shade of a nearby mango tree, nursing or entertaining the little bloke.

Inside the large marquee, Aboriginal lawyer Noel Pearson was explaining his plan to rescue indigenous people from "the poison" of welfare dependency.

On Thursday night, Pearson had travelled to Melbourne where he shared a stage with Federal Treasurer Peter Costello debating the referendum.

And back here the next day at Wujal Wujal, he was telling the locals there still was a long row to hoe.

In doing so, Pearson drops his trademark articulation, referring in local language to fellow Aborigines as "bamas"; to whites as "wangarr".

This is the first major effort at consultation -- telling Cape York's Aborigines what his plan was -- the partnership with the Government that will eventually help the children of today take control of their lives, get jobs, cast aside the shackles of welfare, spurn alcoholism and the attendant violence.

Pearson strikes home the point that Russia is the only nation on earth other than Aboriginal Australia whose population has declining life expectancy.

Surprisingly, he chooses Vietnamese people as role models for living standards. Pearson visited Vietnam last year and studied family life in remote villages.

"People in South America, Asia and Africa are not having the problems we have got," he told the 300 visitors representing all Cape communities.

“We stress because of the grief people are holding. There is so much loss in the community, in families. How many families can you think of that still have mother and father alive?”

“Older brother might be passed away aged 48, 52. We should have had them for another 20 years, having their company, friendship, guidance, support. In Asia you see very poor people. They work hard for a living but they have all their family around them -- kids, grandmothers, grandfathers -- they die at a good old age.

“We have to be kinder to children. If we want to turn it around -- live like my Nanny Melita lived, she lived to over 100 no problem, bush tucker, walked around a lot.

“We have got a big job ahead if we are going to turn it around. If our kids get a disease we will cure it because if we leave them with sores for too long, they grow up with kidney trouble in their 30s. Maybe by 40, we will be burying them.”

Pearson explained that many measures which needed to be adopted would show results for the children, not the current adult generation. What he was not saying was that many were too affected by alcoholism and associated health breakdown to ever be able to resume a healthy life.

“We have to look at the diet -- what we eat. Smoking, try and reduce that. Drinking -- we won't get rid of drinking, but we can drink more sensible . . . We have to get the outstations going -- get transport for the people. Have to get down to the beach -- go fishing, do something pleasant.

“If we are going to solve our health problems it is going to require getting everybody to be able to buy a motor car. We have to get everybody able to buy a fridge, washing machine, furniture, clean mattress, clean blanket.

“They will solve many of our health problems and get us self-sufficient again. My Uncle Peter is Mr Self-sufficiency -- feed himself, build his own house, old as he is. Never rely on anybody for anything. Remember all the old people we had like that -- all the old people who worked on the stations and in the mission?”

“If we are to go down that road -- rely on ourselves and take responsibility -- we will overcome these problems. For too long we have been living with white fellow taking responsibility -- to feed us, clothe us, house us, to look after our kids -- and I think that is the root of the problem.

“If wangarr not going to do it, we not going to do it.

“Our old people did not need programmes to look after our children, to stop petrol sniffing or suicides. We have to take this responsibility, and we have huge opportunities.”

Pearson, who appreciates the opportunities that education gave him, gets noticeably upset when he speaks of the wasted lives he sees in the young people. He speaks of the joy a boy or girl could give their families if they stayed at school, got a job, “kept a sensible head”.

He spoke of the battle for land rights, for native title -- and singled out elders present who had been involved over the years against Bjelke-Petersen's and other governments.

In a challenge to those present, he asks how many from each of their communities were in prison 20 or 30 years ago. None. Now there are prisons filled with indigenous people, mostly for crimes of violence committed against their own people.

He pays special tribute to the Wik people -- those men and women who won the High Court battle that was native title on December 23, 1997.

TOLD and re-told is the story of Wik man, Johnny Koowarta -- the stockman who saved his money and, in 1974, signed an agreement to purchase his people's traditional land -- Archer River Bend cattle station.

The owner agreed to sell at market rates but Bjelke-Petersen soon heard of the deal and set out to block it, labelling it ``land rights by the back door". The government blocked the transfer of the lease to this Aboriginal man, so Koowarta took the case to the Human Rights Commission where he won.

He also went to the High Court and won there in 1982, with the court finding the Queensland government had contravened the Racial Discrimination Act.

But Bjelke-Petersen thwarted this by then declaring Archer River a national park. Koowarta died in 1991 and did not see his people gain title to their traditional land. But no government has moved to change the national park status and return the property to the Wik people.

By last Saturday, Pearson had spent three days and nights consulting with the other traditional owners, answering their questions, allaying their fears.

Beattie's visit was specifically to allow him to assess the measure of support Pearson had from his own people and to this end he was presented with a ``kaban", a letter outlining their expectations and promises.

That letter said: ``While we understand the special responsibilities the Government feels obliged to exercise in matters to do with Aboriginal well-being, we assert our right to determine our own future, and understand better than anyone else possibly can, that any assertion of the right to self-determine must be accompanied by a willingness to assume the full range of responsibilities that full control of our lives will entail.

``It has been an unfortunate consequence of policy and programmes that we have lost much of our capacity to exercise the full range of normal responsibilities. This has led to a significant loss of purpose for many of our people, and of mutual caring. We suffer without always appreciating the suffering of our relations and families, or of the extent of our grief.

``Increasingly, we have come to understand that welfarism, however well-intentioned, has stripped us of our honour and dignity, and taken our future from us.

“We ask government to assist us to re-establish a real measure of self-sufficiency. The task confronting us all, government and the Aboriginal people of Cape York Peninsula, is to achieve acceptable standards of health and education in the face of radically shortened life expectancies, a declining sense of well-being, and low levels of literacy and other basic skills required for participation in the business and job market.

“The responsibility of government can best be demonstrated by making it clear what its expectations are.

“There is a danger we perceive that government will have no expectations of us at all, thus consigning us to the role of second-class citizens. The target outcomes are set through the partnership compact. It is reasonable for government to require us, the Aboriginal parties, to hold up our part of the deal. If, for example, we wish our children to be properly educated, it is incumbent on us to make sure that our children attend school.

“It is our sincere belief that no programme intended for our benefit is likely to succeed, without active participation -- certainly not without our collective commitment to its success. Our commitment to government is that, in return for government's surrendering of the reins, it will be our responsibility to achieve what has to be achieved.

“To state the obvious, it is our lives and our futures that are at stake.”

Beattie listened to the people, and committed the Government to further investigating to see if it were possible to implement the Pearson proposals. At Cabinet in Cooktown on Monday, he briefed ministers on the Wujal Wujal meeting and instructed they co-operate.

For Pearson, this was just the first step. Now comes the difficult task of lobbying state and federal governments to change decades of welfare-driven response and replace it with a system that demands reciprocity from Aboriginal people.

As Beattie and his team of advisers left, I noticed the quiet grandmother still sitting under the mango tree watching proceedings, and wondered what she thought of the proposals -- whether she appreciated the fight Pearson was undertaking for indigenous people.

How many great Aboriginal leaders have come before him, only to be trodden into the dust by the jealousies of their own people, or the intransigence and greed of white politicians?

I introduced myself, and sat beside her on the ground. She spoke in a voice so quiet it was an effort to hear.

“This is Johnny,” she said of the little boy she cuddled. “He's named after his grandfather -- my husband. He died because his heart was broken.

“My name is Martha Koowarta. I'm a Wik lady.”

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