

Indigenous benefits scheme branded demeaning



Rachelle McIvor and daughter Sidney, 2 in Cairns yesterday. Photo: Brian Cassey

Russell Skelton

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RACHELLE McIvor is furious. She accuses Noel Pearson, who the Federal Government promotes as a saviour of her people, of stripping away indigenous rights in the name of social progress.

Ms McIvor, who was once close to Mr Pearson, says his radical plan, adopted by the Government, to lift her Hope Vale community in north Queensland from poverty is a throwback to missionary days when every aspect of an Aborigine's life was controlled by the clergy.

"The agreement provides for daily house inspections, they will look to see if the washing up has been done, if the kids are at school and if the babies' noses have been wiped," she says.

"If people come to stay, they want to know for how long.

"Where else in Australia does this happen? It is demeaning. The agreement strips people of their individual rights and replaces them with selective rights. Everything has to be budgeted for, even the white goods you buy, the rent and the food."

Ms McIvor's criticism is pertinent because she is one of the few Hope Vale students to have broken out of the cycle of poverty, alcohol abuse and diminished expectations.

She attended university in Brisbane where she graduated in arts with a double major in politics specialising in international relations. She attended a recent Geneva convention on the draft declaration of indigenous rights.

The federally funded agreement signed 10 days ago provides \$15 million for welfare and housing and home ownership on condition beneficiaries adhere to a strict set of fiscal and social criteria, such as sending children to school, reducing alcohol consumption and maintaining houses.

Ms McIvor, 36, said Aboriginal people in Hope Vale — a former Lutheran mission of 1200 on Cape York — would be stripped of their rights under the agreement. It is one of several pilot schemes being pushed by Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough to rebuild community pride and self-esteem under Mr Pearson's philosophy of a hand-up-not-a-hand-out approach.

She believes Mr Pearson, the architect of the agreement, has railroaded the community into an agreement where people will have their lives dictated to in exchange for welfare and home ownership.

She says the McIvors are one of several clans in Hope Vale whose objections to the agreement have been ignored. "The community were against the agreement because it was discriminatory and unfair, but it was still put in place anyway.

"It has come to this point for us, like so many indigenous communities in the past, we are powerless because other people are deciding what is best for us. There are no words to describe it, it is before the missionary days."

Mr Pearson, a former lawyer who heads the Cape York Institute, says he wants to restore social order and pride eroded by years of hand-outs.

Passive welfare, he believes, has changed that. Many kids end up in jail and school attendance rates have fallen from 100 per cent to 70 per cent.

He believes communities have to target drugs and alcohol because there are more Aboriginal people in jail than ever before.

Under the agreement, the Government will build 40 homes for those who sign up to agree to maintain the homes they rent and participate in an income-management scheme.