
Noel Pearson's statement on Kevin Rudd

The Australian
23 November 2007

THE following is an edited transcript of indigenous leader Noel Pearson's statement on Aboriginal reconciliation:

Forty-eight hours out from the poll I learned this morning from the front page of The Australian that Mr Rudd has back-downed on his commitment to support a constitutional referendum recognising indigenous people.

This is extremely dismaying on the eve on the election - to be told that a commitment that was made on day one of the campaign is going to be reneged on flagrantly.

There had been no indication whatsoever that this issue was not going to be honoured by Mr Rudd when he came to power. It is only 48 hours from the election that we learn that blackfellas and blackfella issues will not be a matter of priority for the Rudd Labor Government, and particularly his commitment to constitutional change.

"We have to remember that changing the constitution requires a majority of votes from the majority of the states. In order for that to happen you need 90 per cent of the country on board. In other words you need conservatives and progressives both supporting a particular amendment; otherwise they are doomed to fail.

We are in a position where Australia's most conservative prime minister committed himself to finally moving on reconciliation and we have Rudd casually telling the country the commitment that he made on October 11, at the very start of the campaign, at the time it suited him to say me-too, was off the agenda.

We will find ourselves in the same position as when of Hawke was prime minister.

He was a much less conservative prime minister than Kevin Rudd and had a much better attitude to indigenous issues than Rudd. But at the end of those four terms what did we have? We had tears in parliament house and all the regret about things he hadn't done for indigenous people. We will find ourselves two or three elections down the track in the same shoes. We will still find the aboriginal issue was put in the too-hard basket.

He is not going to clutter up the prospects of a Labor Government securing a second term by dealing with political lepers such as ourselves. I'm afraid my view is not to allow Mr Rudd the luxury of saying we will do this is a second or a third term.

(Mr Rudd's change of policy) is a deeply disgraceful act. If there was an indication he would walk away from the commitment during the campaign then that should have been made clear to us much earlier. For those that say let's give Rudd some room to

run with this in some later term, then I just say we will have a rerun of Bob Hawke.

We now have an opportunity to bring conservative Australia with us, to bring this to a conclusion. This matter of indigenous reconciliation can't continue to bleed, can't continue to fester. It's got to be brought to a conclusion. You can't just run with a policy that says 'let's just deal with the practical issues'.

I am a bitter opponent of the Rudd labour government should it come to power and I will insist that they honour the commitment they made on October 11.

This is a repetition of my history with Mr Rudd. My involvement in public life goes back 17 years with Mr Rudd when he first duded us on land rights here in Queensland when he was the director general of the Goss government. We had our bitter disputes at that time, and I thought after a decade and a half he had a more mature attitude towards indigenous policy questions. This kind of off-the-cuff tossing of the aboriginal policy over his shoulder has once again reminded me of the contempt in which this bloke views indigenous people and their affairs. This is a gross betrayal of indigenous people."