



The rise (and fall?) of Pearson, a ‘product of the times’

by Victoria Grieves, | Aug 30, 2012

So Noel Pearson, “Cape Crusader” as Fairfax’s *Good Weekend* magazine dubbed him last weekend, has feet of clay. The emperor has no clothes? The profile from Jane Cadzow brings this news to a white Australia that has styled him, in acute anticipation, as the great black hope. *The Australian* continued the narrative in a spoiler article on the same day.

This is the way that governments and media characteristically work their way around Aboriginal affairs — looking for, indeed creating, the new messiah.

It can be safely said that Aboriginal people have never seen him as the great hope for our futures. The voices of dissent and sometimes outrage have not been heard over the clamour of the media and politicians to find the quick fix, the one sure cure for the Aboriginal “problem”, that Pearson has seemed to represent.

The alternative to the messiah model is to deal with Aboriginal people, in all their diversity, on their own or negotiated terms. To modify the Australian democratic system to incorporate models of self-governance such as is being achieved in Canada is one obvious path to take.

Such solutions are not seriously considered in Australia but put in the too-hard basket.

This means that the expertise and experience of many good Aboriginal people has gone to the wayside in deference to Pearson. The people themselves have often gone that way too, adding to a sense of desperation and failure among them and their families.

Pearson may not have asked for this adulation, trust and hope but he has enjoyed the ride. It has been a dream run and people who know him and his history in Queensland say that it is hard to understand the longevity of his ascendancy, all things considered.

There is no doubt he has had loyal and constant support from some quarters. He has had the high-level promotion and loyalty of Lew Griffiths over two decades. Griffiths, erstwhile cameraman for television, now full-time media adviser for the Cape York Partnerships, has had the right media savvy and connections to promote this young educated Aboriginal man. Pearson emerged as the greater hope ahead of all comers in the 1990s. And there has been a formidable crop of Aboriginal graduates nationally, contemporaries of Pearson. Graduates at least as qualified, if not more so, in Western and in Aboriginal terms.

But where Pearson was not quite able to cut it with many of his Aboriginal contemporaries, even when an undergraduate, he found instant recognition and trust from representatives of the Australian state, media and governments. This has played out in extraordinary ways that promise to be trawled over in time.



What is it that explains the ascendancy of Pearson? Even the championing of him over the years by Marcia Langton is surely not enough. Langton is a strong person, well connected and reportedly scary, but she is also not representative of Aboriginal diversity nationally.

Queensland Aboriginal people report that Pearson and Langton were close colleagues when she returned to that state to work for the minister for Aboriginal affairs, Anne Warner, in the early 1990s. At that time Pearson, a recent law graduate, began working as a consultant for the Goss government in Queensland. This was in the era of heated negotiations with the Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) communities preceding the national Native Title legislation. Their association and mutual regard continue.

The *Good Weekend* article perhaps holds clues to his success. Is it because Pearson has made it possible for non-Aboriginal leaders of government and industry to feel as if they are doing something?

Cape York visitors such as Tony Abbott and Ann Sherry could see deprived Aboriginal communities and children closer to their city homes down south. But there is something irresistibly exotic and even grand about volunteering in Cape York. It is also showing support for Pearson and his prescription for Aboriginal Australia.

The late John Newfong, Aboriginal journalist, observed of Pearson and his ilk that white Australia's penchant for the "blackest and the shiniest" has always allowed mainstream Australia to divert its gaze from long-term Aboriginal rights activists and the demands of Aboriginal Australia, to the novelty of new black talent on the scene. There is a sense in which we are all entertainment after all.

Obviously the shine has gone off Pearson for many of his supporters. Then again, Aboriginal Australia has been less than impressed with him since he first appeared as a media and government-styled "leader". Especially since his rise as a non-representative figure occurred in tandem with the abolition of more formal means of Aboriginal representation and opportunities for Aboriginal engagement with the Australian polity.

In this way Pearson can be seen as a product of the times, a "great man" invented by white interests including government, who simultaneously rises to prominence over the time when

the very same white interests sponsor hollow public spectacles such as the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in the post-Bicentennial era.

And even worse than this, Native Title legislation that delivers little overall to Aboriginal Australia, merely protecting the rights of pastoralists and miners to land; the retrograde abolition of ATSIC and, the implementation of that genocidal abomination, the Northern Territory intervention, occurs in this period as well.

One thing is clear: this great success in “middle Australia” has come with its costs for Pearson, who demonstrates signs of high stress — short temper, abusive language and behaviours, acute weight gain, critical illness — to name those that are obvious to the public eye.

Some of us who have been engaged in Aboriginal affairs over decades have seen it all too many times before. So-called great Aboriginal leaders created, only to be summarily demolished one way or another.

It is a dangerous place to be, an Aboriginal person in settler colonial Australia where lives are destroyed at a whim. A disappointed and disillusioned white Australia bays for blood.

I can't help but wish him a dignified survival and a safe landing. He is after all, one of us. History may not be so kind.

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