

Noel Pearson for PM? Not so fast

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Brilliant oratory: Prime Minister Tony Abbott meets Noel Pearson in September. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen.

There was a moment during Noel Pearson's eulogy of Gough Whitlam at Wednesday's state memorial service when the camera settled on Tony Abbott and you couldn't help wondering if our Prime Minister envied the speaker's oratory gifts and, perhaps, pondered if it heralded a new contender to his crown.

"Pearson for PM" appeared almost immediately as a hashtag on social media - a slogan that might need some massaging, since we've already had calls for Olympic gold medallist Sally Pearson to occupy the top job as well.

The praise for Noel Pearson's speech, great as it was, reminds me of the ardour directed at Julia Gillard's now-famous "misogyny speech" and illustrates how thirsty we are as a people for inspiration, for uplift, for an excuse to abandon ourselves to the fiction our leaders are better than us.

I doubt either speech will be remembered by world history like the words of Frederick Douglass or Susan B. Anthony, let alone find their places beside the addresses of Aristotle, Churchill or Lincoln.

However, the fact remains, a good speech can define a moment and that moment can go on to define the man (or the woman).

Will we one day look back at Pearson's speech at the Sydney Town Hall and say "That's when it all began? That was where Australia's first indigenous Prime Minister announced himself?"

It's doubtful.

While Pearson has many supporters - particularly in the white media - and is an extremely intelligent, capable man, he's a divisive character who has his fair share of detractors, many of whom are indigenous.

Revered Aboriginal activist and academic Gary Foley has described Pearson as a "latter-day black Gordon Gekko preaching 'Greed is Good'," while Amy McQuire, former editor of Aboriginal magazine Tracker, wrote in New Matilda in September, "Pearson's huge media profile and ability to influence government has overshadowed other Aboriginal leaders, the vast majority of whom do not mirror much of his thinking."

After Wednesday's speech, it's worth noting some Aboriginal Facebook users were passing around a cartoon bearing road signs that read, in part, "Slippery surface", "Toxic Risk", "Warning, Shallow Ideas".

As pointed out by Paul Sheehan in August, the chairman of the Cape York Group is also an "unelected, unaccountable bridge-burner" who has more than a few colourful episodes in his past that would probably hamstring a political career.

"I've interviewed Pearson, seen him speak, seen a room captivated by his eloquence, and written in his favour. But his positives are offset by his negatives, the feuds, the disdain, the costly demands on the public purse," Sheehan wrote.

Pearson is undoubtedly an adornment to our national discourse - the praise for his many essays, articles and addresses is widespread and, as one well-known political observer told me yesterday, "it's not like we're overburdened by major public intellects in this country".

Pearson's indisputable brilliance may well be the very reason we'll never see him running for public office; he's too smart to do it to himself.

Why subject himself to the horrendous machinations of party politics, the sulphurous envy of the media and the bovine self-interest of voters when he's already the dominant voice in Aboriginal Australia?

Whether you call it "burning bridges", aggressive advocacy or professional shit-stirring, being Noel Pearson would seem to be a lot more fun out of political office than in.

In Wednesday's eulogy, Pearson quoted Monty Python using the old "What did the Romans ever do for us anyway?" line. It was a fitting allusion for a man who recently provoked another publication to describe him as "not the Messiah, he's a very haughty boy".