

## **No sympathy for Nova's crying game**

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THERE was nothing powerful about Nova Peris' short and tearful statement to the nation's media on Thursday.

No matter how some of the commentators would spin it, Ms Peris copped out. She chose the politics of race - that proven absolver to which she and her supporters have again turned. Who would dare hold her to account when wrapped in such a cloak? To do so would be racist. Probably sexist, too.

This is, of course, absurd, but it is much safer to do as she says and not ask questions. Even safer to go the other way and sing her praise, show your Facebook friends and Twitter followers how enlightened you are and how you "get it".

In this spirit, Ms Peris told Australians through tears not to criticise her, not to judge her, because she was Aboriginal.

So you know I haven't paraphrased unfairly, here is one verbatim, albeit somewhat incoherent, quote: "I may be leaving but I'm leaving on my terms and I want to make this clear: no-one should judge me. I am inherited Aboriginal woman, with strengths and resilience I've had to endure for 45 years. And it's not easy to wake up every morning and bounce out of bed and pretend life is fantastic. Because it isn't." I am sure it isn't easy and I acknowledge I, as a white man, could never, and will never, understand, but nor can I understand just what this has to do with anything from the past turbulent week. She never explained.

Ms Peris is an accomplished woman. She is an inspiration to many. And that's what makes Thursday's statement and the gushing tributes that followed sit so uncomfortably.

Her message, spelled out quite clearly, was that Aboriginal people in office should not be held to the same standards as representatives from other cultural backgrounds.

I wonder what Pat Dodson - Labor's newest senator, who was standing nearby during Ms Peris' statement - would think of people not holding him to account as they would others; not judging, not criticising for the fact of his Aboriginality.

I wonder what message that would send to the next generation of Aboriginal leaders.

If this is indeed how we are to proceed then it warrants more than tweets and a few newspaper inches, for it is a proposition going deep to our nationhood and its future.

Ms Peris' obfuscation was so complete, we're not even sure what she didn't want judged.

Was it her performance in office? The way she controversially entered as Julia Gillard's "captain's pick" in 2013? What about the positive work she has done on government committees?

Was it the fact she was secretly looking for other jobs without the knowledge of her colleagues or staff? Was it the debacle of her exit, her outing in Fairfax media and then going to ground for two days, temporarily throwing her party's campaign off the rails?

Similarly, we don't know what made her upset that day. It may have been the emotion of Sorry Day, for which she has a genuine and painful connection. Or was she simply upset she got busted when she did?

She wouldn't say, yet still her words have been paraded in some corners as a sort of Aboriginal fightback against the oppression of the system.

That oppression is real in pockets of Australia. In the Territory, the pockets are more like swathes. Australia's treatment of its first people, then and even now, is its greatest shame. Nova has fought back, admirably, on other occasions. This was not one of them.

Looking through the torrent of naive Tweets on Thursday night, people were confounded as to why Nova's resignation had attracted such attention. Politicians resign all the time. The conclusion among many was it must be a racist media.

Well, no, and let me explain to these people why Ms Peris' resignation received the attention it did. Firstly, she resigned just weeks from an election, when scrutiny of politics and parties is already in a naturally heightened state.

Secondly, she was outed by Caroline Wilson from The Age as being a frontrunner for a job with the AFL. If not for the whole election thing, and the fact she was secretly scoping another job, this perhaps would not have been so noteworthy.

Thirdly, instead of stepping up immediately to explain, she went to ground for two days. Staff couldn't reach her, not even Bill Shorten. For those two days, her colleagues campaigning the length and breadth of the nation had to field questions about Ms Peris instead of talking about why voters should elect them. It fed itself. Intrigue grew.

Lastly, though we could go on, she was Julia Gillard's "captain's pick" in 2013 at the expense of sitting Senator Trish Crossin. The bad blood within the Labor Party from this decision became part of the turbulent Rudd-Gillard-Rudd political narrative and a matter of historic note.

It continues to be a source of angst within the party today. Simply, Ms Peris' resignation is a matter of intense public interest. She vaguely referenced family as the reasons behind her decision. Of course, no one can begrudge her this. But family wasn't mentioned in the belated media release to announce she was to quit and at no time has she addressed the speculation of the AFL job, which began the chain of events leading to Thursday.

That press conference, in which she answered just two questions, was her time to be honest and upfront. To explain to the Territorians she represented, black, white or blue, why she was walking when there was still so much work to do.

Explain and move on. Instead she ducked and ran.

Alongside her, arm around her shoulder, concern pouring from his face, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten lavished his praise, never mind what her selfish handling of the exit had done to his campaign.

But he had no choice. His language on indigenous affairs, particularly last week in Darwin and this weekend in Melbourne, has been powerful, even moving.

To even hint at disappointment or to lean ever so slightly towards criticism of Ms Peris would have set the commentators off again, damaging the campaign further and obscuring the significant announcement to double ranger funding, a potential gamechanger in the bush and the probable clincher for the marginal seat of Lingiari.

But those who laugh at the supposed failed experiment of the Nova Peris "captain's pick" are also misguided.

Ms Peris was the first indigenous woman in Federal Parliament. This does mean something. It was - and still is - significant.

The Territory is now in an extraordinary situation in which five strong, capable and proud indigenous women have put their hand up to fill the space. Next time there may be more.

This should, and I do believe it will, be Ms Peris' lasting legacy. Instead of celebrating this and exiting with grace and honesty, she has used her Aboriginality to guard against valid scrutiny. There have been instances to applaud the way Ms Peris has conducted herself against odds, but her exit on Thursday must be called out for what it was: a cheap trick to save face.