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'I was 35 and made the wrong turn': Noel Pearson reveals his greatest regret

- Fergus Hunter January 28 2016

Australia's most prominent Indigenous leader and activist, Noel Pearson, has said not entering politics is his greatest regret and called for a new centrist political force to fix a political system failing Indigenous affairs, which is in "deep crisis".

Mr Pearson, founder of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership and a member of the government's Referendum Council, also expressed remorse at former prime minister Tony Abbott's political demise.

"It's my greatest regret," he said of his decision to work on reform outside Parliament rather than running for election himself.

"Fifteen years ago I began our reform journey in Cape York...I was 35 years old and I made the wrong turn.



Noel Pearson, founder of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, gives his first big speech for 2016 at the National Press Club in Canberra. Photo: Andrew Meares

"I made the wrong turn because I think I've hit the limit of how much influence you can have barking from the outside.

"These reforms that we seek will not get up without a stronger voice, unless black fellas are inside the system, this is about as much leverage as anyone can muster from the outside."

Mr Pearson told the National Press Club on Wednesday that while he counted Mr Abbott as his closest friend and Assistant Minister Alan Tudge as "a co-fighter in our cause", reform required strong, Indigenous voices inside the political system.

In his address, he declared a new political movement bridging the left and right was needed to achieve real change for Indigenous people, praising independent Nick Xenophon as the best example of the "radical centre".



Close friends: Mr Pearson with former prime minister Tony Abbott during a visit to Cape York in 2011. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

"The glaring omission in Australia's political landscape is the absence of political representation hunting for that centre.

"The real solutions lie in that elusive centre and it is in the parliamentary process that the centre is most needed."



Mr Pearson praised independent senator Nick Xenophon as the best example of the "radical centre" in Australian politics. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

During his speech, Mr Pearson slammed the government for being dismissive of Indigenous proposals - referring to his Empowered Communities report - while defending Mr Abbott as a sincere advocate for Indigenous people.

"They've treated us with contempt. We spent two years developing a policy framework, we place it before government and we don't get an answer for 12 months. It doesn't even go to cabinet."

Mr Pearson said that the government is not doing enough and "not serving our people in the way it should" and criticised the public service as "not up to the task" in Indigenous affairs.

"Make no mistake, Indigenous affairs is in deep crisis. We are seeing good things in isolated areas but not seeing the tectonic shifts that are needed," he said, arguing that Indigenous affairs presided over by a minister and department had reached a "dead end".

"Sorry, it's not going to produce the change that we've been seeking for 50 years."

But Mr Pearson lamented that Mr Abbott's time as prime minister was "cut short", not giving him enough of an opportunity to pursue necessary reforms.

"I think there's been few people more genuinely signed up to our cause than him," he said.

"I regret his [political] passing."

However, he added that Mr Abbott struggled to understand the nature of the problems facing Indigenous people and said Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, as someone experienced with referendums, would be an asset in the campaign for Indigenous constitutional recognition.

On the issue of recognition, Mr Pearson expressed optimism but warned that successful referendums are notoriously difficult to achieve and that the proposal must find a narrow window between left and right and between "overambition and desultory minimalism".

He renewed his call that a constitutional body be established to represent Indigenous people and advise government, saying it appealed to conservatives in a way that a racial non-discrimination cause didn't.

Mr Pearson also praised the recent speech delivered by journalist Stan Grant as a masterful commentary that spoke for Indigenous Australia and accompanied former prime minister Paul Keating's famous 1992 speech in Redfern Park.