

Noel Pearson, I support recognition of Aboriginal culture

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For as long as Noel Pearson has been a public figure, I have been an admirer of his. And on occasion he has been kind enough to say a nice word or two about my work.

Admiring Noel doesn't mean I always agree with him. I am immensely sad that because I disagree with him about both the principle and utility of changing the Constitution, he has concluded that I am a bad person with only malevolence and meanness in my heart.

The astonishing piece that Noel has written in today's *Weekend Australian*, which at times loses touch with reality, requires some setting straight of the record.

Noel has a history of sometimes blowing an emotional gasket, as his friends attest. In 1997 he said the Howard government was "racist scum". The Howard government had its problems, and in its early days I was one of its strongest critics, but it was never racist scum.

Nor does it help a debate to use terms like that. Normally Noel doesn't.

If it makes Noel feel better to insult me, fair enough, but if anyone who opposes constitutional change is subject to this abuse, what are the prospects of a civil debate?

Noel's sentence that my response to the Uluru Statement is to claim that "the truth is that Aboriginal parents do not love their children" is an outrageous and wicked lie. I have never thought, said, emoted, winked at, connived with or in any way joined any sentiment that could ever, on the wildest possible reading, be construed in that way.

Noel apparently gets to his position like this: the Uluru Statement says inter alia that Aboriginal parents love their children and also proposes several specific constitutional changes. I oppose the constitutional changes, therefore I must oppose the statement that Aboriginal parents love their children.

That is dishonest and unfair. It poisons the debate. It's unworthy of Noel Pearson.

Much better is the image of me as a pith-helmeted 19th-century liberal on the back of an elephant — that's good rhetorical fun and well within the standard deviations of normal political jousting.

Noel also misrepresents and caricatures my constitutional arguments, setting up many straw men. I don't idealise the US or any other country. I do think there are positive lessons in the universalism of US citizenship.

I celebrate and admire Aboriginal culture, and have never written a single word to the contrary. I support wide acknowledgment of the Aboriginal element of our history and culture. We live in a society rich with such recognition. I don't believe it is right or necessary to do this through constitutional change. Warren Mundine, whom Noel surely cannot accuse of hostility to Aborigines, opposes Noel's constitutional proposals on similar grounds to me.

On this issue I disagree with Noel, who I think is a person of goodwill doing his best. But he should not try to create enemies of people who simply disagree with him. Sometimes people of goodwill can disagree and remain friends.

That would be my hope.