

## 'Bucket of s\*\*\*': Noel Pearson abuse claims 'straining' relationship with Queensland Government

By the National Reporting Team's **James Thomas**



*PHOTO: The head of the Queensland education department cautioned Mr Pearson over his behaviour.*

**Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson is regarded as one of Australia's most eloquent public speakers. His eulogy at Gough Whitlam's funeral: oratorical brilliance. Away from the pulpit, his words can take a nasty turn.**

### Key points:

- The revelations suggest the relationship between Noel Pearson and Education Queensland is fraught
- It comes after an ABC investigation raised concerns of a culture of intimidation in Good to Great Schools
- Minister confirms Mr Pearson once called her a 'f\*\*\*ing white c\*\*\*'
- Mr Pearson's spokeswoman denies he made the abusive remark

"Arse coverer", "maggot" and "bucket of shit" were some of the bullying words used by Noel Pearson to abuse senior staff at Education Queensland, according to a letter obtained by the ABC.

The June letter is written by the director general of Education Queensland, Dr Jim Watterston, and addressed to the founder and co-chair of Good to Great Schools Australia, Noel Pearson.

"Dear Noel ... when we met on 25 May 2016, I felt there were several times you behaved in an intimidating manner and made inappropriate comments [I clearly recall pejoratives such as 'arse coverer', 'maggot', and 'bucket of shit', to name a few]," Dr Watterston wrote.

"Where I draw the line, however, is when similarly intimidating and abusive behaviour is directed towards my staff".

The ABC understands Mr Pearson's comments were an expression of his displeasure with Education Queensland's handling of the Cape York Academy's Aurukun school.

The Aurukun school briefly closed after violent threats towards staff earlier this year. The education department runs the school in partnership with Good to Great Schools Australia.

The organisation has received \$37 million in taxpayer funds since 2010 to help lift education standards for disadvantaged communities through the delivery of an American teaching method, Direct Instruction.

In the letter, Dr Watterston cautioned Mr Pearson.

"The behaviour displayed towards me and my staff is not conducive to a respectful and cooperative relationship, and cannot continue," he wrote.

In response, Mr Pearson apologised to Dr Watterston.

"I am very conscious that at times that weariness makes me fractious, but I am nothing if not honest, blunt and tenacious about our cause," he wrote.

"You are an educator, and I am a philosopher and social reformer."

## **'I went home at night feeling very uneasy'**

The letter's revelations come after an ABC investigation reported poor business practices at Good to Great had left government funds vulnerable to fraud and official misconduct.

"I went home at night feeling very uneasy about some of the transactions which were occurring, which did not sit right with me," said former executive principal of the Cape York Academy, John Bray.

Mr Bray told the ABC he felt pressured by Good to Great staff to make inappropriate payments from the school's bank account.

"There was expenditure occurring on particular things such as flights, accommodation for particular support services which I thought were not reasonable," he said.

"Ultimately, I think the kids did miss out."

## Good to Great rejects bullying claims

Head of governance at Good to Great, Michael Andrew, denied Mr Bray's allegations.

"We would never be in a position where we would override the decision of the principals," he said.

Noel Pearson's spokeswoman Kerie Hull added to the denials saying "there have never been any findings of bullying, unfair dismissal or WorkSafe matters" at Good to Great.

However, the ABC has obtained several internal letters of complaint addressed to Good to Great's board members. The letters raise serious concerns of bullying, harassment and intimidation within the organisation.

In one internal complaint a former employee described the culture at Good to Great as "toxic".

The ABC has also confirmed two recruitment agencies in Cairns refused to supply job applicants to Good to Great because of concerns over bullying and abusive behaviour at the organisation.

In response, Good to Great's Michael Andrew said "I suspect this may be about competitive envy. Because we actually do quite constructive work with agencies regularly in Cairns".

## 'He yelled at me and said I was a f\*\*\*ing maggot'

Several former employees have spoken with the ABC but said they currently felt too intimidated to be named.

"Noel has considerable political power. People are timid in responding to him," said Ian Mackie, the former Queensland assistant director general of Indigenous education.



**PHOTO:** Noel Pearson during a visit to Aurukun earlier this year. (ABC News: Louisa Rebgetz)

He said criticising Mr Pearson's educational reform agenda, which he does regularly, could have explosive consequences.

"I went to say hello in the Qantas club in Cairns. He yelled at me and said I was a f\*\*\*ing maggot."

"My response was 'I didn't know you felt that bad about it Noel, this is not personal. This is about policy and kids.'"

Noel Pearson's spokeswoman Kerie Hull told the ABC that Mr Pearson "admits to calling Ian Mackie a maggot".

Mr Pearson's wrath is not confined to bureaucrats.

"He swung around, he stood up and he started swearing at me," said Barbara Shephard, who has been the local nurse of Cape York's remote town of Coen for 48 years.

In 2009 she campaigned against Noel Pearson's move to have the American teaching method, Direct Instruction, taught in the Coen school.

Mr Pearson's reaction to her opposition was menacing.

"He said I was a f\*\*\*ing white c\*\*\* and an interfering bitch," Ms Shephard said.

"I personally have no respect for him whatsoever. I feel he is a bully. He's a foul-mouthed bully."

Noel Pearson denies speaking to Barbara Shephard disparagingly. But evidence is mounting to suggest the Indigenous leader has a habit of excoriating opponents.

***Minister confirms she was also called 'f\*\*\*ing white c\*\*\*'***



**PHOTO:** Kate Jones has never spoken publicly about the exchange with Noel Pearson. (AAP)

Queensland Education Minister Kate Jones has broken a long silence to confirm a story, first reported four years ago, that Noel Pearson racially abused her with the phrase "f\*\*\*ing white c\*\*\*".

In a text message, the Minister's adviser told the ABC that Ms Jones "has never spoken about this ever before to anyone".

The incident occurred in 2009 when Kate Jones was Queensland's environment minister.

She and Stephen Robertson, who was Queensland's resources minister the time, led a delegation to Cairns to discuss "Wild Rivers" legislation with Mr Pearson.

"Pearson was dead against it," according to Mr Robertson.

He told the ABC that was the catalyst for Mr Pearson's tirade of abuse.

Mr Pearson's spokeswoman Kerie Hull said "Noel Pearson emphatically denies calling the Education Minister (at any time) a disparaging name and that he has a mutually respectful relationship with Kate Jones".

But the head of Queensland's Education Department, Dr Jim Watterston, told the ABC the relationship between Mr Pearson and the department was "certainly strained".

The Minister's revelations may break it.

## **Pearson defends behaviour as 'colourful language'**

Speaking on AM this morning, Mr Pearson addressed the allegations of abusive behaviour.

"I accept that I am a very passionate and relentless advocate on behalf of reform and I am surely not the only one who engages in colourful language," Mr Pearson said.

"But I completely, completely reject the suggestion that I directed any of those words at Minister Kate Jones in 2009."

He also rejected claims of poor business practices at Good to Great Schools and suggestions of bullying.

"In terms of governance and administration, you could not find a much more committed organisation than ours," Mr Pearson said.

"In relation to bullying, I wouldn't say that we have a bullying culture at all, what we do have and I'm completely unapologetic about, is we have a hard-work culture.

"You come across the occasional employee who tries to conflate a hard-work culture with a bullying culture, but none of those claims have ever been made out."