

Abbott may be best hope on hot issue . . . on Noel time - COOKTOWN

Lindsay Murdoch
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THIS is Noel country. Noel Pearson, of course.

Tony Abbott may be blasting a government slowly to smithereens in Canberra, but in Cape York, a tour of traditional lands occurs implacably on Noel time, not on Tony time; there is only one songline.

The wet is just beginning up north. The sun shimmered on the glorious parabolic sand dunes at Gudi, an ancient camping ground Pearson wanted to show the Opposition Leader. Abbott sweated buckets, and enthused, pleased with the arid adversity.

Pearson also wanted a quiet word on the river. The two men took off in a boat from a riverbank marked with the skid of a large crocodile. They were gone rather long. Given Abbott's natural tendency to say yes to any Bear Grylls sort of adventure, we began to contemplate misadventure.

Enormous butterflies flapped in the languorous heat. Our small pale party from Canberra startled every time a fish breached the water. Contingency plans were contemplated, only mildly in jest. But the dinghy returned.

Back on land, Pearson reflected on a 10-year friendship with Abbott. We began yarning in the sun, with one of Abbott's cheerful press aides in ear shot. "Let's go to the shade," Pearson suggested, spurning both the oppressive noon heat and the vigilant listener. No argument. Noel land. Noel rules. Noel time.

I asked how Abbott compared in his mind with John Howard. Pearson, controversially with his fellow indigenous leaders, forged a significant relationship with Howard on the belief that a conservative politician could heal the scar of indigenous affairs.

Abbott is different to Howard, Pearson answered. "For a conservative, he gets it, the language and the culture, profoundly. Different to Howard. He knows it can't just be all about the responsibility agenda. He gets it."

What sort of prime minister would Abbott make? "I've got no doubt he'll be very good for indigenous affairs."

Pearson reflected on the lost opportunity of 2004 - Howard engaged, evolving, listening "but the progressive side, our side, couldn't put aside their visceral hatred for the man."

"2004 was the time, and I think we squandered it. At the end of the day, it's Howard or someone like Howard needed to complete this circle."

How about him? I motion to the man waiting without rancour out of ear-shot on Noel time. Pearson glanced over my shoulder. "This bloke is the best prospect."