
Labor accused of selling Cape down the river

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ABORIGINAL leader Noel Pearson has accused the Queensland Government and federal Labor of "selling out Aborigines" to secure Greens preferences, warning the move would destroy any chance indigenous people in Cape York had of shedding welfare dependency.

Mr Pearson said the acquiescence of the Queensland Government to pressure from the Wilderness Society to lock up Cape York from development, ostensibly to protect the region's "wild rivers", was "absolute folly" and was done without the consent of the Aboriginal people who live there.

Last week, Cape York Land Council chairman and traditional owner Michael Ross wrote to Premier Anna Bligh and Kevin Rudd, asking for details of "preference deals" with the Greens in the local seat of Leichhardt.

Mr Ross also asked that Ms Bligh commit to further consultation on the declaration of wild rivers and to get traditional-owner consent before pressing on with the plan.

Mr Ross, Mr Pearson and other Aboriginal leaders were incensed to be presented last week with a state government map showing that about 90 per cent of Cape York would be covered by the legislation protecting the region's rivers, tributaries and basins.

They had previously been told the "protection" from development would apply strictly to the rivers alone, not the millions of hectares of land of the Cape.

Mr Ross said yesterday that Aboriginal people now could not establish small businesses or enterprises in the region.

"My family will hurt as a result of Labor's deal with the Wilderness Society and future generations will hurt, too," he said.

Last week, the Greens in Queensland announced they would give preferences at the November 24 election to Labor in 28 of the 29 seats they are contesting in the state. This includes Leichhardt, which contains Cape York. The exception is Wide Bay, where the Greens oppose the state Government's decision to build a dam at Traveston.

Leichhardt is held by retiring Liberal Warren Entsch with a 10per cent margin.

Ms Bligh said yesterday she had instructed three ministers to meet with Cape York traditional owners and report back to her within a fortnight.

And the federal Opposition Leader replied yesterday to Mr Ross, saying Labor had not entered into any preference agreement with the Greens in relation to World Heritage listing for Cape York, and said he would consult with the traditional owners on the decisions that affected them.

Mr Pearson said that in January the region had started "the most fundamental reform in indigenous affairs with the commencement of welfare reform in Cape York".

"At the very time we are seeking to rise out of welfare to grasp opportunities for economic development, the opportunities are being shot down by a combination of wild rivers and a radical prohibition on the limitations of vegetation clearing," he said.

"Aboriginal people are paying the cost for election deals made by Peter Beattie over the past three terms. The state government Natural Resources bureaucrats who met in communities with traditional owners were even accompanied by Wilderness Society activists.

"The negotiations with traditional owners took place with Wilderness Society persons present ... it seems to me the state Government has delegated its public-service functions to a green organisation."