

Noel Pearson: we must be actors in our own destiny



Noel Pearson relaxes with his son Charlie and some local children in 2010: 'We need families that nurture and provide for each other and have strong bonds of responsibility and care'.

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- Noel Pearson

This gap won't close until black fellas take charge of our lives and governments allow and enable us to do so with their support.

For all of Malcolm Turnbull's talk about "doing things with indigenous people and not to them", in reality there is no "with". This rhetoric sounds good but turns out to be an alibi for an absence of policy. It is laughable piety.

It is 10 years since Closing the Gap targets were set by Kevin Rudd. Along with his historic apology to the Stolen Generations, this was a crucial reform of the Rudd government. It should stand for as long as disparity marks the position of our people in our own country.

Little progress has been made in a decade.

I predict, unless there is a 180-degree policy turnaround that puts responsibility into the hands of the people who need to hold it, there will be negligible progress over the next 10 years as well.

Why do I say this?

The problem is the present policy orientation comprises two parties who cannot achieve their own stated aims, as long as they take the positions they do.

The first party are governments. They want to retain control over everything, and resist devolution of power and responsibility.

They don't understand the Catholic social teaching of subsidiarity, articulated by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*: place responsibility at the lowest level closest to those who can best exercise it. Yet they turn out to be hapless. Most everything they try to do hardly works.

The second party are blackfellas. We see governments keeping control and refusing to allow us to be actors in our own destiny, and we let them be responsible for the results. We let them own the poor outcomes. We absolve ourselves because governments have claimed all power.

We literally let them take the baby.

Both parties are convinced in the almighty saving power of "service delivery" as the means to closing the gap. More services, more funding, better co-ordination and so on. Service delivery by government departments, by non-government organisations, by indigenous organisations and today increasingly, by for-profit companies. A minority of them good, a majority simply parasitic.

You want to know where the money goes: into these service delivery industries. And there is no end to the funding consumed by these industries. A good part of the fundamental services are reasonable, much of it not. What is true, though, is the gap will not close when service delivery is the main response.

Man and woman cannot live by service delivery alone.

Rather, there must be agency on the part of blackfellas. We have to take charge of our problems, and take advantage of our every opportunity. No one can do this in our stead, least of all governments. Because passive welfare impedes our agency, it must be reformed.

In Cape York Peninsula, we are at an inflection point in thinking about the future of our people. It is almost 18 years since we started the conversation about taking power back from governments and taking responsibility for our lives. It has been a difficult conversation, but today there is a common language.

In the second half of last year, we engaged traditional owners and community leaders in articulating an agenda to empower our people. We looked at our promising successes, mistakes and failures and are convinced we have to take charge of our predicaments. No one can or will do it except for us. We need government support, but it is up to us.

The Closing the Gap targets are indicators, but they don't tell us what we need to do. Of all of them, life expectancy is the ultimate indicator of the gap. Many factors going beyond health, to education, employment and economic development, have a bearing on improved life expectancy.

So our thinking is we need to keep building the capabilities of our people.

We have made good progress these past two decades. Hundreds of young Cape York children have completed secondary schooling, many of them in Queensland's best schools, and many of them have gone on to obtain tertiary qualifications in law, nursing, teaching, commerce and skilled trades.

Importantly, many of them are now forming the next generation of Cape York leaders.

It will be when we build the capabilities of our people that the gap will start to close.

What are these capabilities?

We need to start with the prenatal foundations for lifelong good health, care and management. It all starts in the womb.

We need effective education from early childhood onwards to enable maximum realisation of our children's potential and set them up for lifelong learning.

We need families that nurture and provide for each other and have strong bonds of responsibility and care, parents that give children good memories and set them up for the future living in safe, prideful homes.

Our villages must provide respectful and mutually contributing neighbourhoods, with a volunteering ethic to build social capital, trust and participation. Ask not what your community can do for you but what you can do for your community.

Our villages must be places where there is respect for each other and people abide by our norms, customs and laws, and disputes that arise are settled and violence of all forms is strongly sanctioned.

We must ensure the safety, growth and development of girls so they realise their fullest potential and inequality and injustice against women is eradicated.

Our boys must grow up with esteem and respect for themselves and for women, all deserving of dignity and care.

Our people must have the opportunity to learn and transmit to their children their ancestral language and cultural knowledge and heritage to preserve and grow our cultural capital.

Every person can participate in the leadership and governance of their community and has the freedom to contribute to decisions about the future, and organisations are well managed and there is good governance at all levels.



Brisbane students Imani Woola and Wayneard Wolmby: 'We need effective education from early childhood onwards'.

Every post-school person is able to work, including unpaid self-reliance, to sustain a living and there are jobs for those needing jobs, and mobility to go to places where jobs are.

Every person or group that desires to establish and operate an enterprise is able to do so, and there is local and regional economic development to sustain them.

There is stewardship of the land and resources of the community, and they are enabled to use them for sustainable development.

Tribes and communities are able to build their tribal wealth for intergenerational equity.

There are markets for goods and services, property, capital and labour that are accessible and vibrant and that enable a strong private and co-operative sector to grow.

There is necessary transport, telecommunications and energy infrastructure to sustain the community and enable economic development.

We build these capabilities iteratively over time and the gap will close. If we don't, then it is unlikely parity will ever be reached.

These capabilities are conventional and universal. All successful societies have these capabilities in some form or another.

How can we make sure there is a concerted effort to build these capabilities for our people?

First, we believe there must be structural reforms that oblige governments to relinquish those responsibilities they have taken away, and that put our people in the driver's seat and government as supporting navigator.

Second, we believe there must be indigenous agency. In our communities and our families, as well as personally.

You can't be the driver if you don't take responsibility. When we take hold of the wheel, then we will be accountable for the results.

Starting in 2013 I worked with leaders from eight regions around the country: Galarrwuy Yunupingu from northeast Arnhem Land; Ian Trust and Nolan Hunter from East and West Kimberley; Andrea Mason from NPY Lands; Paul Briggs from Goulburn-Murray; Sean Gordon from the central coast of NSW; Shane Phillips and Chris Ingrey from Redfern and La Perouse in Sydney; and on the invitation of then Labor minister Jenny Macklin, we produced a policy blueprint called Empowered Communities.

Our report proposes structural reforms that would change the relationship between governments and these regions.

Here at last was a core of regions from various places across the country talking a common reform language and proposing a united agenda.

The Empowered Communities report proposed an analogous approach to indigenous affairs to national economic reform. The country changed from uncompetitive and protectionist to competitive and productive, and this was done through a series of structural reforms. Systemic sclerosis necessitates institutions to oblige parties to adapt to a new reform paradigm.

In the case of the economy, the reform principle was competition. We proposed the principle of indigenous empowerment: everything we do must be about empowerment. And we saw a legislated indigenous productivity council playing a role in ensuring the paradigm shift.

When there is structural reform in place, the players on the ground then play a new game with new rules. It will no longer be the Aboriginal industry game but Aboriginal empowerment. In this way, the only programs and initiatives that are funded are those that result in individual, family and community empowerment.

Rigorous, proven initiatives will have to replace pet ones lacking evidence. Duplication and triplication of programs must be eliminated. Hard choices will need to be made about scarce resources, and communities will be involved in making these choices.

Effectiveness and impact will be de rigueur in choosing what is funded and what is not.

The report was given to Turnbull following his ascension to the prime ministership in 2015. After a long consideration, Turnbull partially accepted the Empowered Communities concept, providing funding to enable work to be done at the regional level.

However, he rejected the proposal to legislate an indigenous productivity council to mandate the new policy. In other words, he rejected the structural reform.

Instead he announced at last year's Closing the Gap speech the government would legislate for an indigenous commissioner to join the Productivity Commission, without any mandate to oversight.

This legislation and the appointment still has not happened. The PM said nothing about his failure to deliver on Monday. If an explicit commitment can be forgotten a year after it's made, then how will the gap ever be closed?

It is just as well the productivity commissioner has gone nowhere because it will not work. The legislation should be opposed in the parliament because it will turn out to be another wasteful idea.

More report writing is not the answer here. There must be a structural mechanism to change the paradigm from disempowerment to empowerment, and that will necessitate mandate and supervision, not embarrassment through reports. God knows how inured we already are by outrageous facts and figures highlighted by reports. Who remembers the Northern Territory Youth Detention report now that that's done and dusted?

Turnbull's rejection of the structural reforms proposed by Empowered Communities was ill-considered. Notwithstanding his long cogitation, he made the wrong policy call.

It was not unlike his subsequent consideration of the Referendum Council's report on constitutional recognition. I have no doubt the bloke reads the documents. The problem is he has no judgment. He is a complete neophyte when it comes to public policy. He simply cannot discern reform policy and this is evident across the range of national policy issues.

So like empowerment, he ends up rejecting the voice to parliament. These are structural reforms that are crucial to making productive use of the billions of dollars we have available to make good on our desire to achieve parity. Without structural reforms we will go nowhere, and in another 10 years blackfellas will be saying: "We told you so."

If a government grasped the nettle and introduced real reform, structural reforms that enable indigenous agency, then every February both blackfellas and whitefellas will be accountable for whether the aperture between hope and despair is closing.

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