

Coalition leads way on land rights, says Pearson

Author: Patricia karvelas
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CAPE York leader Noel Pearson says the Rudd and Bligh Labor governments have allowed the Coalition to take the lead in the defence of land rights.

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh's Wild Rivers Act and Kevin Rudd's failure to repeal it showed they had abandoned Labor's commitment to land rights by blocking the economic development of indigenous land, Mr Pearson said yesterday.

He told a Senate inquiry into Tony Abbott's bill to overturn the Wild Rivers Act that the Queensland legislation was racist.

``The exercise of traditional rights is important, but that will never lift our people out of poverty and misery," Mr Pearson told the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee hearing in Canberra. ``We have to be able to undertake land use that generates economic return for the people who live there.

``We're not going to be serious about closing the gap on indigenous disadvantage if we have this view that all Aboriginal people should be happy . . . and all they should be entitled to do is stand on one leg in the sunset picking berries."

Ms Bligh declared last year that three major waterways on Cape York -- the Archer, Stewart and Lockhart rivers -- were wild rivers, imposing severe restrictions on development near them or in their catchment areas.

Mr Pearson said yesterday that this year ``we have the conservatives basically defending and supporting land rights in a way that Labor was doing in 1993".

``Now I'm hoping that Labor can see this, and they can see that, in fact, it's the conservatives who are honouring the original Mabo deal . . . and just because they might have political discomfort about that, I think they should keep their eyes on the prize here.

``The prize is we have the opportunity for bipartisan enhancement on the rights of native title holders."

While supporting Mr Abbott's legislation, Mr Pearson denied helping to draft it. Labor senators pressed Mr Pearson to admit that he did not know of any Aboriginal developments that had been held up by the legislation.

Mr Pearson said not one house had been built in Hopevale because of state

government environmental red tape and cumbersome planning laws, despite promises three years ago by the Howard government.

He said Canberra had not put enough pressure on the state government to overcome its inertia.

Mr Pearson urged federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin to listen to the evidence being provided to the committee.

Speaking outside the hearing, Mr Pearson said Labor senators who questioned him yesterday appeared to have been briefed by the Bligh government.