

Is Rachel Perkins right to dismiss Noel Pearson's critics or is the criticism of him fair?



Rachel Perkins ... has come to the defence of Noel Pearson and compared his work and influence on Indigenous affairs equal to that of her famous father, Charlie Perkins

By Dr Woolombi Waters
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Just over a week ago in the Sydney Morning Herald Rachel Perkins wrote an article stating anyone who chooses to be an Aboriginal leader has to be mad. I disagree. They're not mad but instead courageous, impassioned and visionary. Just look at Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, eloquent, dignified calm and respected.

The difference between myself along with many other Aboriginal people and Rachel's sentiments was in perhaps what best represents this leadership. In showing her unwavering support for Noel Pearson Ms Perkins used a highly emotive account relating to the relationship between a father (Charles Perkins) and his daughter, surviving cancer and asking readers to "imagine watching your people dying in front

of you".

The entire article uses an emotional argument that remains subject to implied notions and perceptions associated to our mob. There are no research-based facts to support her statements. This is purely her opinion relying upon abstract statements that pull at the hearts of her readers, the majority of which are non-Indigenous.

As Darumbul woman, Amy McQuire writes in newmatilda.com Pearson has long been the "undisputed black darling of Australian media for decades", even though his politics and programmes remain in opposition to the greater majority of Aboriginal leaders throughout the country.

Where Noel does receive support is in mainstream non-Indigenous media across the country, most often in The Australian newspaper and with little analysis of what he proposes and even less scrutiny of his outcomes.

Which is why Rachel Perkins' article in support of Pearson, rather than being an article which unites Aboriginal Australia continues a very dangerous divide. Many Aboriginal people believe Pearson's huge media profile and ability to influence government denies a true representative voice on the problems faced by Aboriginal Australians and denies solutions from the ground up.

Eva Cox, Professorial Fellow Jumbunna IHL at the University of Technology, Sydney recently wrote: "The evidence of what works doesn't support the Pearson model, which is very much top down and personally driven"

. But non-Indigenous readers just don't care, nor do they give credibility to what other Aboriginal leaders believe and articles like the one written by Rachel Perkins allows them to continue to live in denial.

The problem is, due to her national profile amongst non-Indigenous peoples, Ms Perkins undermines our right as Aboriginal people to debate amongst ourselves the true meaning of Aboriginal leadership through a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation.

Eva Cox, also states: "White (non- Indigenous) people have wide ranges of views, as do any sizeable population group. Assuming there will not be varied political beliefs and views on many issues among Indigenous populations is in itself a racist assumption".

I agree. Ms Perkins' comments are even more politically loaded and dangerous in an Indigenous community that has been suffering from trans-generational and lateral violence for decades. Lateral violence is a term that describes the way many people covertly or overtly direct their dissatisfaction inwards and towards each other, themselves and towards those less powerful than themselves.

Perkins attempts to shame, blame and to socially isolate others throughout the article in a classic demonstration of lateral violence when she dismisses criticism of Noel Pearson as his being "hated" for confronting "Aboriginal People" and when she further describes criticism against Pearson as a "tsunami of ignorance and

resistance". And yet, in light of the \$534 million of Budget cuts being applied to our many services and programmes – inquiries about the funding provided for the Noel Pearsonsponsored Cape York Welfare Programme, one of many programmes Pearson has funded by government, is not only valid, it appears as timely and important.

Minister Scullion recently confirmed by the end of 2015 Noel Pearson's Cape York Welfare Reform Programme will have received over \$200 million in funding from both Federal and Queensland State governments. As our readers will know this money has been provided to only four communities ranging in population from around 100 in Mossman Gorge to 338 in Coen, to 1071 in Hope Vale and around 1500 in Aurukun. In all, that's \$200 million over six years for 2961 people.

Remember this is just one of a number of programmes sponsored by Pearson to receive government funding. Another programme he supports was also recently awarded a further \$22 million to implement a teaching model within Aboriginal communities.

Another major concern is Noel Pearson co-chairs (along with Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet associate secretary, Liza Carroll) an elite committee established to oversee the way Indigenous funding is spent. Not only Aboriginal people but all Australians should be asking how is it the co-chair of the very committee which decides where this funding should be spent has such a monopoly on Indigenous funding?

Remember this is the one guy more critical than anyone else in the country in regard to Aboriginal funding and questioning where it is spent.

There is no mention in Perkins' article of the amount of funding Noel Pearson receives or the lack of scrutiny his programmes receive just as there is no scrutiny in the mainstream publications where non-Indigenous Australians adore him.

And yet that Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation report, published in 2012 by the former government department FaHCSIA, highlights little to no qualitative evidence of any social change coming from the Cape York Programme Pearson manages. It is continually stated throughout the report reliability and completeness and the boundaries of the trial were not always clear. This makes it difficult to disaggregate the specific effects of welfare reform from other policies and programmes in these four communities.

The evaluation report also notes a clear absence of benchmarking data, lists gaps within the research and observes data is rarely available. Data collection presents real problems in developing any sense of accountability or change within the communities served by Pearson's welfare reforms.

And again, there is nothing in mainstream media questioning this funding. Instead we get criticism from Perkins against anyone who dares ask for further scrutiny. Funding support of this magnitude without a requirement to provide rigorous, quantifiable research data to support the outcomes is a step backwards.

It takes us back to the bad old days, when our confused lateral violence and cliques almost destroyed self-determination through a management culture that thrived under ATSIC. In criticising an article written by Paul Sheehan and others that question Noel Pearson's behaviour, Perkins overlooks all these facts, instead dismissing further analysis as "a somewhat resentful view" questioning Noel's success.

I, like many other Australians, read the article in the Sydney Morning Herald by Paul Sheehan and rather than taking a resentful view of an article attacking Pearson's success the article notes Pearson enjoys a position of privilege as part of Prime Minister, Tony Abbott's inner sanctum.

And as the report states, when one of the inner sanctum threatens a journalist in a room full of other journalists to "beat you to a pulp" and "throw you off the balcony" as stated by Sheehan, there is nothing "resentful", "ignorant" or personalised in reporting what happened.

Just imagine if it was Joe Hockey carrying on as Noel Pearson does. It would have been front page news in every paper in Australia. That is undeniable so why not the same rules for Pearson?

Outside of Noel Pearson's lack of financial accountability in administering a multihundred million dollar empire on the back of taxpayers' money is a long documented public history of verbal abuse, hostility and anger towards people who challenge his authority.

What is particularly concerning is many of these verbal and abusive attacks have been targeted towards women dating back to 1999 when he poured a cup of water over ABC journalist, Sharon Malloy over a question he didn't like in an interview. Among others was a female adviser of then State Environment Minister, Kate Jones, who was dismissed by Pearson as an "arse-wipe".

Both accounts were covered in Sheehan's article which also tells of a time when Pearson, according to former parliamentarian Stephen Robertson, let fly with "a tirade of expletives and abuse", including more than once, the phrase "f---ing white c---s... starting very slowly, very deliberately and speaking quite softly, then over the next 15 or 20 minutes reaching a crescendo".

I'm sorry, Rachel Perkins but considering Noel's position where he is regarded by many non-Indigenous Australians as our most influential Indigenous leader and as an outspoken commentator advising on Indigenous affairs, and in having the ear of the Prime Minister, we have a right to question such behaviour.

In comparing Pearson to her own father, Charles Perkins, the era and politics are all wrong. The 1960s were witness to a dramatic upsurge in political activism, which had a profound effect on Australian society with the political turbulence created in the wake of the Freedom Rides and the Tent Embassy going hand in hand with the Australian Referendum of 1967.

This was a time of active political demonstration and Aboriginal people asserting

their rights as a collective. In dealing with Pearson's politics and his ruthless attacks on our own people we witness a growing divide between "grass root" community and "conservative" elements to the detriment of community leadership.

In writing her article Rachel Perkins clearly shows where she stands in this divide and let's be clear - this is a clear division between the haves and the have-nots within our communities.

History demonstrates through such division we are witnessing a decline in Indigenous cultural nationalism and a fall in Aboriginal revolutionary activity. It is here that history will remember the Pearsons and the Perkins for playing their part.

It has been stated many times, not one Aboriginal person has ever voted for Noel Pearson to command the influence he has ... not one.

After reading Perkins article I jumped on Facebook to witness just how many of our mob were against what she wrote. Outside of the voices given to mainstream media it is clear we continue the fight against a racist government symbolised through postcolonial oppression.

Unlike these new Indigenous powerbrokers re-enforced through mainstream media, we are still striving for community development, greater employment and educational outcomes driven from within our own communities as a way of overcoming Indigenous poverty. It is clear for these programmes to work they need to be self-driven and led from within our own communities, unlike the elitist opinion pieces and programmes that see ourselves as the problem. Perkins writes that only a few have the courage like her father or Pearson. She says Pearson is "fearless in confronting Aboriginal people themselves and being hated by them for it."

No, that's not true. True fearlessness is standing up to government and holding those in power to account while representing the most vulnerable in your community. It's about challenging those who continue the oppression of Indigenous peoples despite having the weight of mainstream media opinion and mainstream Australia against you.

Fearlessness is what a true Aboriginal leader in Rosalie Kunoth-Monks demonstrated when she said in front of all Australians: "Don't try and suppress me and don't call me a problem. I am not the problem. I have never left my country nor have I ceded any part of it. Nobody has entered into a treaty or talked to me about who I am. I am Arrernte Alyawarre female elder from this country. Please remember that. I am not the problem".

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