



He's Not The Messiah, He's A Very Haughty Boy

By New Matilda
September 3, 2014

Two years ago, Noel Pearson shepherded the then opposition leader Tony Abbott on a trip to Aurukun, in Cape York. Abbott had been to the Cape on several occasions by that stage, including a three-week stint as a teacher's aide in Coen.

Both Aurukun and Coen are sites of Pearson's expensive Cape York Welfare Reform Trials, the others being Hope Vale (his home community) and Mossman Gorge.

It would not have been hard for Abbott to play the role of teacher's aide in Coen. The small school has some of the highest attendance rates in Queensland – before and after the trials – which have not shown any changes in Coen's already exemplar attendance figures.

Abbott's visit brought CEOs from around the country to Aurukun to paint a library and plant trees, much like the volunteer tourists who pay great sums of money to “help” locals in developing countries do work they could probably be employed to do themselves. The payoff is Facebook profile pictures and a feeling they are doing good.

But with Abbott's visit, there was one key difference: His ‘volunteerism’ turned out to be a pretty big impost on the Australian taxpayer, costing almost \$10,000 in travel allowance.

Nevertheless, Abbott's journey to the Cape also brought a media contingent. One of those was Katharine Murphy, a then Fairfax journalist, and the current deputy political editor of the Guardian.

According to Murphy, Aurukun was “Noel country” and Abbott was running on “Noel time”. Of course it wasn't ‘Noel country’, nor was it ‘Noel Time’. Aurukun isn't even Pearson's home community. Hope Vale is, although that's still not ‘Noel Country’ (Pearson does not have the support of the majority of his own community for his ‘welfare reforms’).

This outrageous blanket assertion of the diverse communities in the Cape, with their strong leaders and differing but equally valid viewpoints, was a key reminder that many portions of

the mainstream media are blind to the complex threads interwoven across Aboriginal Australia.

There are leaders other than Noel, particularly on the Cape, who would be appalled to learn they run on 'Noel Time'.

But however offensive, that sort of media language – “Noel Country” – was not a surprise to those who follow Aboriginal affairs. For decades, Pearson has been the undisputed black darling of Australian media, much to the dismay of a large number of blackfellas. His causes make the front pages of media outlets across the country, most often in *The Australian*, but with little analysis of what he proposes and shockingly low scrutiny of his outcomes.

Pearson's huge media profile and ability to influence government has overshadowed other Aboriginal leaders, the vast majority of whom do not mirror much of his thinking.

Which is why it must have come as a surprise for Pearson to read a *Good Weekend* profile piece in 2012, which followed an article by the *Australian's* Tony Koch, lambasting Pearson for his bully boy ways.

The latest “attack” came from the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Paul Sheehan two weeks ago, who, in a harsh tirade against Pearson called him out for having stormed into the Fairfax offices in Sydney and threatened an editor that he would beat him to a pulp, and even throw him off the balcony.

Sheehan's article caused a bit of a furore and it came from unexpected quarters.

Aboriginal filmmaker Rachel Perkins, the daughter of celebrated activist and bureaucrat Charlie Perkins wrote a disarming ode to Pearson, comparing him to her father and almost anointing him Charlie's successor.

According to Perkins, “Anyone who chooses to be an Aboriginal leader has to be mad”.

For a start, Aboriginal people don't get to 'choose' to be leaders. That choice belongs to the community, not the media, nor solely Rachel Perkins. It's also not 'mad' to stand up for your people, no matter how challenging the job.

Perkins continues: “Noel Pearson, follows, more than any other, in the footsteps of my father. My fear is that he will meet the same fate in the face of a determined agenda to publicly destroy him,” Perkins opined.

“I have observed Aboriginal leadership buoyed and destroyed in a manner something like a national sport. Who will topple the next Aborigine who assumes a higher status than their station? How dare an Aborigine challenge the press, blast the bureaucrats and politicians? How dare an Aborigine think they are more expert on Indigenous affairs? Let’s watch as we bring him down.”

Apparently, in the age of ‘freedom of speech’, threatening to beat someone to a pulp and throw them off a balcony represents ‘leadership’. The way you conduct yourself as an ‘Aboriginal leader’ clearly doesn’t bother Perkins.

Perkins piece is riddled with so much blatant misinformation I don’t even know where to begin. Bringing down blackfellas obviously has been a “national sport”. Pearson has been a player, but not the target. He has enjoyed unprecedented media adoration and very limited scrutiny of his Welfare Reform Trials, precisely because he tells white Australia what it wants to hear, and I would hazard to guess, because of the tactics exposed in the Sydney Morning Herald and The Australian articles.

As the Australian National University’s Jon Altman notes: “By and large, white Australia has bought the now dominant narrative that self determination has been a failure and that it is high time that Aboriginal individuals take responsibility. This is a message promulgated by Noel Pearson and echoed in the nationally-dominant Murdoch media (where Pearson has a regular column). It is repeated in bipartisan national political consensus and by the nation’s most powerful corporate leaders.”

White Australia doesn’t want to hear how it is complicit in the devastating situation that afflicts the First Peoples. What is more comfortable is to shift responsibility back onto black communities, precisely the prevailing Pearson agenda.

Welfare reform is undoubtedly important, but this brand of “tough love” is disempowering, as shown in the results of the trials. Six years on, they are still “trials”, but their influence is reflected in the NT intervention, the Student Enrolment and Attendance Measure, and the Pearson-influenced “Empowered Communities” model, all of which show little evidence, or prospect, of success.

Aboriginal people in the Territory are still living in horrendous conditions, while harrowing statistics – the most devastating of which is that the Aboriginal incarceration rate has jumped by 90 percent, and that the rates of self-harm and attempt suicide increased by nearly 500 percent – cast ominous shadows over government rhetoric.

Pearson's welfare reform trials are heavily supported by media like *The Australian*, and have seen at least \$150 million flood into just four small communities on Cape York since 2008 – millions and millions of dollars that goes to a population of just a few thousand people. Where are the concrete outcomes for this level of expenditure? Where is the scrutiny?

Certainly this level of almost uncritical reception to an Aboriginal policy is not reflected anywhere else in Aboriginal affairs, where black organisations are scrutinised much more harshly than non-Indigenous organisations, and against the backdrop of savage cuts to the black budget.

Pearson has never been the victim.

In fact, the “national sport” has been in bringing down Aboriginal people who do not conform to white Australia's vision. Do you see any other government minister or media outlet giving a consistent voice to strong activists like Gary Foley or Michael Mansell or David Claudie or Rosalie Kunoth-Monks? Do I have to raise the case of Professor Larissa Behrendt, who was hounded for weeks by *The Australian* because of an ill-thought out tweet, who had her reputation dragged through the mud despite her tireless and awe-inspiring advocacy for the voiceless and vulnerable (a key example is her role in seeking justice for three Aboriginal children murdered on Bowraville mission in the early 90s).

If that isn't a “national sport” to bring down a blackfella, I don't know what is. It's certainly not the game played against Pearson.

Pearson's level of influence is an envy to First Nations people so used to being ignored. The shouts for treaty, land rights and basic human rights are silenced by the blackfellas who concentrate power at the top – people like Pearson and Abbott's Aboriginal advisor Warren Mundine – who are supporters of government as long as government are supporters of them.

Pearson was the only Aboriginal person given any warning of the Howard government's racist NT intervention in 2007. Then Indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough rang Pearson 15

minutes before the press conference, launched with no consultation with Aboriginal people actually affected by the policy.

One of the most horrendously racist aspects of the NTER was the blanket income management scheme – which was loosely based around Pearson’s trials in the Cape, and which Pearson publicly backed.

When talk inevitably turned to a racist intervention in the Cape, Pearson was apoplectic in his rage. What’s good for other blackfellas is apparently not good for Pearson.

Pearson’s influence is not unrecorded.

When he was shadow Indigenous affairs minister, Abbott told an elected Aboriginal councillor on the NSW Aboriginal Land Council board, the largest member-based Aboriginal organisation in the country, that if he needed to know something on Aboriginal affairs, all he had to do was pick up a phone to Pearson or Mundine.

To tell a democratically elected Aboriginal representative that he should take advice from unelected Aboriginal ‘leaders’ has been the hallmark of Abbott’s position towards Indigenous affairs (the unelected, handpicked Indigenous Advisory Council has largely replaced the national representative body the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples).

How can you be the victim of a “national sport” to bring down an “Aborigine” when you have the ear of the Prime Minister?

Perkins, nonetheless, continued:

“Pearson’s philosophy is spreading. Indigenous people across Australia support him. They are not necessarily the loudest of our mob, but they quietly agree. To you I say, do not swallow the negative gossip. Make your own mind up and if you are really interested in what’s going on in Indigenous Australia make an effort to read what Pearson writes, rather than the out-of-context quotes. It is bracing, transformative thinking, underpinned by international modelling, research and deep consideration.”

To be fair, there are Aboriginal people who support Noel Pearson just as there are white people who support the Motor Enthusiast Party’s Ricky Muir.

But that doesn't mean the widespread discontent among many in our communities should be ignored or discounted. Critics of Pearson are often silenced, or were never given a platform to begin with.

And the "negative gossip" does not overshadow key concerns that many in communities have with Pearson's influence across Australia, and the ambiguous outcomes of his Cape York welfare reform trials.

Perkins says 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."

That to me, is not being fearless, that is what happens when you don't listen to the people you are supposed to be helping. The hatred comes from disempowering a people who have already been historically disempowered by successive governments.

Reverse the race: imagine a self appointed white leader, who advocates policies on behalf of 'all Australians' which are widely condemned yet generously funded. Would you discount the anger of the majority? Would you call their criticism 'negative gossip'?

True fearlessness is standing up to government, and holding those in power to account. It's about challenging those who smooth the way for government. And it's done despite having the weight of mainstream media opinion, and the larger Australia, against you.

That is not a fearlessness demonstrated by Pearson.