

Noel Pearson  
“An Australian history for all of us”  
Address to the Chancellor’s Club Dinner  
University Of Western Sydney  
20<sup>th</sup> November 1996

Noel Pearson, one of the most admired and controversial of younger aboriginal leaders, was barely into his thirties when he addressed academics and visitors at the invitation of the Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney, Professor Derek Schreuder, in 1996.

Eloquent, energetic and well-educated, Pearson has the ability to succeed in politics or in a big city law firm. Instead, he has chosen to work at promoting radical solutions to the enormous problems of aboriginal people living in remote communities, in his "Country" of Cape York as well as elsewhere. He says he feels an obligation to do this.

Noel Pearson as a young boy lived with his family on one of the Cape York mission sites, Hope Vale, in Far North Queensland. He won a scholarship to St. Peter's Lutheran College in Brisbane, and later studied law and history at the University of Sydney.

The occasion for this speech was one which might discomfort a less experienced speaker than Noel Pearson. He was invited to address a distinguished academic gathering at the University of Western Sydney. His host was his former history professor, the Chancellor, Professor Derek Schreuder. His topic, inspired by High Court decisions and political statements at the time, was Australian history. In particular, the way Australian history presented the historic relationships between the European settlers and the Aboriginal peoples they had found in the country.

The topic was very much in the news in 1996 for two chief reasons, each of which Pearson alludes to.

Firstly, in 1992, the High Court of Australia had ruled that the late Mr. Eddie Mabo and a group of people from Murray Island in the Torres Strait owned traditional legal title to the lands they and their families had always lived on. The High Court decision stated that the legal idea of 'terra nullius' (empty land belonging to no one) could not apply to this piece of Australia. Yet the doctrine of 'terra nullius' was the legal concept applied to the rest of Australia. The decision had to lead to a new approach to Aboriginal land rights. In December, 1993, the

Commonwealth government passed a law making it possible for some groups of Aboriginal people to gain control of their lands. To date, while some have succeeded, many have found it difficult to provide the necessary proof that they had maintained links with their ancestral areas. Their ancestors had many years before been forced off their lands and into missions. In recognition of this fact, a fund to purchase land for Aboriginal use was set up.

Secondly, just a few days before Pearson's speech, the newly elected Prime Minister, John Howard, had criticised certain views of Aboriginal history. Mr. Howard had deplored what was called "the black armband view of history". The term referred disparagingly to the work of those historians who saw the history of relations between the Aboriginal people and their colonisers as a story of dispossession, exploitation and violence. He implied that the guilt for such actions was now being laid upon the whole non-Aboriginal population, who very much resented it. Pearson quoted what the Prime Minister had told a radio interviewer:

*Of course we treated Aboriginals very, very badly in the past-very, very badly-but to tell children whose parents were no part of that maltreatment, to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we're all part of a sort of racist, bigoted history is something that Australians reject.*

Pearson's speech was constructed with full awareness of its audience. The formal language contrasts with that which Pearson uses in interviews. The use of many allusions to authorities, including Professor Bill Stanner's Boyer lectures, Robert Hughes, Henry Reynolds, and the High Court judges in the Mabo decision, adds weight to the argument of the speech. Pearson's point is that: the debate is about how Australians should respond to the past.

Pearson is trying to reunite the country; he's trying to reunite the whites and blacks. Pearson is intelligent enough to realize that he can't debate forever because he can't undo everything. He uses a very effective metaphor and uses very effective colloquialism from another country. He's trying to quote a totally different dialogue which is a technique. Dialogue within a speech, "Americans would call a hot button issue..." Pearson quotes people who are highly regarded; he refers to experts and historically important people. Such as Professor Geoffery Blainey, Sir Robert Menzies and John Howard. He also quotes an expert Professor Bill Stanner, he does this to convince the audience. He appeals to higher authority, that's a technique used by many of the speakers. He believes that we are telling lies and we are even teaching them to our children

about the mistreatment of authority. He tries to make a good point by using colloquialism to make a point, “goodies and absolute badies...” he also provides the audience with a very balanced opinion as he separates then unites. Pearson is a very highly academic man, he even goes far as to deny Darwin’s Theory, as Darwin believed that Aboriginals would die off eventually though till this present day are still alive.

Throughout Pearson’s speech he quotes many people of importance, including fellow aboriginals, previous prime ministers, scientists and many other people who are highly regarded.

### **Noel Pearson: ‘An Australian history for us all’**

This political and persuasive speech was addressed at a distinguished academic gathering at the University of Western Sydney where Pearson was invited and deals with the issue of Aboriginal reconciliation and how it was approached in 1996. His topic was inspired by time’s High Court decisions of ‘*terra nullius*’ the ‘*Mabo Case*’ and the recent criticism of PM John Howard of deploring ‘*the black armband view*’ of Aboriginal history. The issue was and is a very politicised and divisive one in Australia as Pearson refutes the ‘*black armband*’ view of Australian history being promoted at the time and examines it in an historical context. He argues for an appreciation of the complexities of the past and not a superficial, divisive one that draws Australians together, that the concept of guilt is not constructive and irrelevant to ordinary Australians and that a more intellectual approach is needed. Pearson’s prudence and rationality is noteworthy, as of an Aboriginal descent, he describes the elements of the debate in a language of discussion and is always careful to give his sources and notes where he has found the quotations he utilises, names, lectures and books. The composed analysis is a technique of persuasion at least as effective as more heated presentations. Pearson constructed his speech with full awareness of his audience using formal register as his audience is academic and the occasion is political thus his’ is an academic discussion of politics, status quo and history. The speech is a discussion essay with a formal register and supports his vantage point with examples and quotes as he appeals to authority to give his perspective credibility. The use of many allusions, including Professor Stanner’s Boyer lectures, Robert Hughes, Henry Reynolds and the High Court judges in the Mabo decision add weight to the speech’s argument where Pearson’s main point is that: ‘*The debate is about how Australian should respond to the past*’.

Pearson commences his speech with humility, noting that he cannot ‘*promise my teacher’s rigour*’ and acknowledging his position as a guest by thanking and praising the host. His tone is serious as he addresses the ‘*Chancellor, distinguished guests*’ and objectively establishes his credibility as he had ‘*been taught*’ in the University drawing attention to his credentials with his ‘*understanding of the colonial past*’. He makes it clear beforehand that he intends to respond to the PM’s interpretation of the debate. It is implicit in ‘*turbulence*’ and inclusive ‘*we are still grappling*’ that he believes that Australians are struggling with the Aboriginal issue. In a different tone he uses direct satire to ridicule by using the conservative PM’s own emotive words ‘*indulging in agonising navel-gazing*’ to condemn and illustrate the PM’s excessive emotive and restrained form of discussion and how the debate has been trivialised. In ‘*I will nevertheless persevere*’, Pearson is being sarcastic inviting the audience to sympathise with him against their critic (PM). ‘*Hot button*’ is an emotionally moving colloquialism that Pearson uses reminding his audience in a

sarcastic tone with reference to Pauline Hansen ‘*member of Oxley*’ that the ‘race’ issue is used to attract votes. The inclusive second person pronoun in ‘*the polls will tell you*’ implies that politicians are populists only interested in votes and trivialise the issue as ‘*should get over it*’ appears heartless and by noting that the PM supports such views Pearson responds angrily. The strong adjective ‘*vehemently*’ emphasises Pearson’s rejection as he quotes PM to stress his manipulative derailment of the argument making it an issue about a ‘*racist, bigoted past*’. ‘*Firstly*’ is an example of language associated with a formal discussion and indicates that he’s making a series of points. Pearson uses an impersonal ‘*It*’ to set a formal tone and ‘*I*’ as accepted in a formal speech but he excludes the personal. His vocabulary contributes to a formal serious tone like ‘*historiography*’, ‘*terra nullius*’ and defines a legal term after a colon which is common in formal writing to amalgamate two complex sentences. He establishes his credibility of opinions by appealing to authority thus showing his recognition of the academic audience’s background and his self-intelligence and validity and rationality of his opinion in his allusions, quotations and references to Professor Stanner, Henry Reynolds, Justices Brennan, Dean and Gaudron in the Mabo Case, Michael Dodson and Robert Hughes. Pearson quotes rather than paraphrasing to stress his credibility and strengthen his case making it more direct and original. The names of relevant judges and a summary of their judgements prove his point that the Mabo Judgement supports new narrative of Australia's past. In third section, Pearson quotes the PM’s admission that ‘*injustices were done*’ pointing that the debate is about we should ‘*respond to the past*’. He uses the possessive pronoun ‘*my*’ and ‘*I*’ for provocation and asks direct rhetorical questions ‘*How do we...*’ frequently along with allusion to ‘*neo-Darwinism*’ and quotes Paul Keating to emphasise his point. The sixth section’s commencing is an instance of Pearson’s occasional satiric note claiming that politicians’ statements are ‘*indistinct*’. He paraphrases *Macbeth* in ‘*the more vehement the denials the more they betray an anxiety to exorcise guilt*’ to mock the PM. In the seventh section, he inserts ‘*Cooper’s*’ letter to support his point that even if Australians can’t be individually responsible for past deeds, they’re responsible for what happens in the present. The letter with its angry, sarcastic tone and emotive words like ‘*theft*’ and ‘*apathy*’ is more personal and emotional in contrast to Pearson’s objective speech. The last section begins with an underlying irony as the problems of 1938 Cooper’s letter are still current concerns. When Pearson states ‘*I always said it was the turmoil and confusion the country had to have*’ is another example of satiric tone that is a humorous parody of Keating’s famous phrase ‘the recession we had to have’. Pearson concludes his discussion by recommending that Australians should have an ‘*open and generous heart*’ and without sarcasm returns to his attack on the PM’s mode of debate more directly expressing disappointment and anger which is reflected in his language as he accuses the PM of using emotional labels rather than engaging in intellectual debate. He capitalises these labels fragmenting them in separate exclusive sentences ‘*Black Armbands*’, ‘*Guilty Industry*’ to highlight PM’s use of emotive slogans and displaying his own anger in ‘*anti-intellectual*’ with negative connotations. ‘*Tabloid*’ is a metaphor stressing the interest of media in headlines and sales rather than carefully researched articles. His anger erupts in the end when he says ‘*brain-damaged dialogue*’ and uses his own label ‘*the politics of mutual assurance*’ for politics that dull the public’s capacity to think and be challenged to consider new ideas. The last sentence confirms that Pearson has discussed Howard’s obsessions with labels suggesting that he should read ‘*Robert Hughes rather than the opinion polls*’.

Noel Pearson – ‘An Australian History for us All’:

- Pearson begins his speech with humility. This is a familiar rhetorical technique through which the composer admits that their argument is not flawless.
- Reference to politically different and/or similarly minded people. Has the effect of giving a balanced account of the argument which Pearson is trying to convey. ‘I come only with some observations about how our popular understanding of the colonist past is central to the moral and political turbulence we are still grappling with as Australians.’
- Statistics – ‘The polls will tell you this...most ordinary Australians are offended by any suggestion that they should feel guilty about any aspect of the country’s past.’ Pearson uses statistics to strengthen his argument or demonstrate a point.
- Direct quotation – Pearson quotes Prime Minister John Howard on John Laws’ radio program in order to highlight what he believes is a commonly held belief amongst the Australian public (that we should not be blamed for what happened to the Aboriginal people).
- Allusion – Pearson alludes to scholars regarding his argument. For example Geoffrey Blainey’s ‘black armband view of history.’
- Sarcasm – Pearson employs language such as ‘fiction’ ‘myth’ and ‘the invisibility of Aboriginal people’ when speaking of Australia’s Aboriginal history.
- Rhetorical questions – ‘how do we explain the past to our children?’ Through this technique Pearson draws the audience into the speech by inviting them to answer the question for themselves.
- Historical allusions – Pearson refers to patriotic and proud events such as Gallipoli and the Kokoda Trail. To demonstrate that Australia’s ‘collective consciousness’ includes the past, and therefore should include the Aboriginal past.

Other historical allusions include references to the holocaust, which helps Pearson demonstrate how serious he perceives the matter to be