

Noel Pearson lambasts 'racist' ABC at Paul Keating biography launch in Sydney

- Georgina Mitchell
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Indigenous leader and activist Noel Pearson. Photo: Josh Robenstone

Indigenous leader Noel Pearson has lambasted the ABC as "miserable" and "racist" during a speech in Sydney.

Speaking to launch a biography of Paul Keating on Monday, Mr Pearson – a lawyer and academic – said the media "aided and abetted ... ignorant ministers and malign bureaucrats" to wreck "promising reforms".

"[N]ot the least the country's miserable, racist national broadcaster: a spittoon's worth of perverse people willing the wretched to fail," Mr Pearson said midway through his speech.

"They need blacks to remain alienated from mothers' bosoms, incarcerated in legions, leading short lives of grief and tribulation – because if it were not so, against whom could they direct their soft bigotry of low expectations?"

"About whom could they report of misery and bleeding tragedy?"

"Between [magazine] *Quadrant*'s hard bigotry of prejudice from the right and the ABC's soft bigotry of low expectations on the left, lies the common ground of mutual racism."

Mr Pearson described the pair as the "Scylla and Charibdes of the black burden in this country", invoking Greek mythology to express having to choose between two equally unpleasant options.

The ABC issued a statement in response to the speech.

A spokesman said the broadcaster "provides more coverage of Indigenous issues and has a broader Indigenous staffing profile than any other Australia media outlet".

"It has given an extended platform and broad audiences to a range of Indigenous commentators including Noel Pearson, Josephine Cashman, Marcia Langton and others to canvass issues like welfare dependency, alcohol abuse and violence against women," the spokesman said.



Former prime minister Paul Keating. Photo: Daniel Munoz

"The ABC has also been at the forefront in recognising Indigenous talent. ABC Radio, ABC TV and ABC News have set up Indigenous units to better reflect Indigenous culture in staffing and in story-telling. These initiatives have delivered programs including the award-winning series *Redfern Now* and *Gods of Wheat Street* and the recent hiring of journalist Stan Grant, whom Mr Pearson has described as 'speaking for black Australia'."

Mr Pearson's remarks, in a speech titled *Rhetoric, Imagination, Power*, were given at an office in Barangaroo in front of an audience including dignitaries. The biography, *Paul Keating: The Big Picture Leader*, was penned by the paper's columnist Troy Bramston.

Mr Pearson went on to praise Keating's capacity for imagination and creativity, including his "salutary" addresses – at Redfern in 1992 and in a eulogy to the Unknown Soldier in 1993.

He compared current political leaders to Mr Keating, and said the former Labor leader would not have abandoned Gillian Triggs or Julian Assange as the current government has.

"Whatever one thinks of the besieged head of the Human Rights Commission, Keating would never abandon Triggs – or indeed Assange – to suffer alone," he said.

"I think he stood by my mob too long for his own good. His opponents sought to cast us as a black albatross around his electoral throat, but his advocacy for reconciliation and Mabo never wavered. Because it was the right thing for the nation."

Mr Pearson finished his speech by outlining what he believes should be a national agenda for indigenous affairs: focusing on constitutional recognition, empowerment, and cultural embrace.

"Indigenous Australian cultures and languages should be officially embraced as Australian cultures and languages," he said.

"The vision of Barangaroo developed by the subject of this biography can be the country's greatest cultural amplifier, a gift to the nation and a promise to our future.

"But we can't pith helmet this vision. The Indigenes must play a 21st century role in this vision: we have to do as well if not better than the New Zealanders."