

EDITORIAL

Noel Pearson's big questions on covering indigenous issues

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Indigenous leader Noel Pearson's criticism that the ABC was fundamentally racist, needing "blacks to remain alienated and incarcerated, leading short lives of grief and tribulation" and "willing the wretched to fail" warrants serious consideration and a detailed reply from the national broadcaster. Its responses and treatment of the story so far have been scant. Without Aborigines, Mr Pearson asked on Monday, "against whom would they direct their soft bigotry of low expectations ... about whom could they report of misery and bleeding tragedy?"

It is true, as an ABC spokesman said in a statement, that the corporation has given an extended platform to a range of indigenous commentators, including Mr Pearson. The broadcaster's indigenous television department has produced quality drama and documentaries. Such work helps fulfil its charter to broadcast programs that "contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community". That facet of its work is not the problem. And, to its credit, ABC News recently hired journalist Stan Grant to edit its indigenous affairs coverage.

Many of those who agree with Mr Pearson's criticism, including this newspaper, believe the problem is largely a matter of attitude, balance and sometimes ideology in news and current affairs reporting. Like the ABC, *The Australian* has never backed away from reporting the painful truth about life for many Aborigines, especially in remote communities. Award-winning reports such as Rosemary Neill's expose of domestic violence in the 1990s, Tony Koch's revelation of the gang rape of a 10-year-old Aurukun girl and Nicolas Rothwell's graphic reports from the Northern Territory come to mind. Beyond documenting the problems, however, *The Australian* has always believed it's important to dig deeper, to ask hard questions and canvass difficult choices governments and indigenous people themselves face to improve their lives and prospects.

By implication, Mr Pearson's scathing criticism of the ABC is a challenge to all media to consider their approach to reporting indigenous issues. Abject poverty and disadvantage among any sector of our population, the underlying reasons for such problems and potential solutions are legitimate topics for reporting and analysis. As opposed to taking a paternalistic approach and representing Aborigines as victims, however, we've reported on and frequently endorsed the "tough love" regimes initiated by Mr Pearson on Cape York and others. These approaches are geared to reducing alcohol abuse and violence, improving health, lifting school attendance and improving what's taught in classrooms. We've also reported widely on practical policies, such as income management for both black and white welfare recipients, and supported them as a means to break down dependency on taxpayers.

The ABC, while heavily focused on a human "rights" agenda, tends to pay little attention to the importance of personal responsibility. That was the point of Bill Leak's famous controversial cartoon, run in the wake of the ABC's damning *Four Corners* report on

juvenile justice in the Northern Territory. In an effort to encourage personal responsibility and highlight the progress being made by many Aborigines, *The Australian* has covered the success stories generated through initiatives such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, which is supporting 500 secondary and tertiary students and has a network of 300 graduates.

In supporting Mr Pearson in a letter published online yesterday, Minjungbal man Peter, who works with young people on small commercialisation projects, was right when he said angry nihilism about British “white invasions” did not work and were greatly favoured “by people (black, faux black, and white) whose actual experience of indigenous disadvantage is theoretical, rather than practical”. The only fair and reasonable media agenda in reporting indigenous affairs should encourage what Peter outlined as the goals for Aborigines: “rising up, claiming their pride and accounting for themselves”.