

Noel Pearson says ABC is a racist broadcaster 'willing the wretched to fail'

Indigenous leader attacks media's 'mutual racism' while delivering a tribute to former prime minister Paul Keating



The Indigenous leader Noel Pearson said the ABC was engaging in the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' during a tribute to the former prime minister Paul Keating. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

By Christopher Knaus

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Noel Pearson has launched a scathing attack on the ABC, describing it as the “miserable, racist national broadcaster” and accusing it of engaging in the “soft bigotry of low expectations”.

The prominent Indigenous leader made the remarks while delivering a tribute to Paul Keating during the launch of a new biography of the former Labor leader in Sydney on Monday.

Pearson spoke of the strength of Keating’s leadership, which he said was underpinned by an ability to blend imagination, rhetoric and power.

“No Australian politician brought these three together like the subject of this biography,” he said.

Pearson attacked Labor for repudiating Keating's legacy following his 1996 election defeat, something he described as Labor's "most diabolical stupidity".

"They ended up disowning their own achievement and handed to their opponents credit for the growth and opportunity of the new century," he said. "It took Howard's 13-year tenure to come to an end before Labor started invoking that legacy. But, even today, that legacy may be embraced but its masterful model is still found wanting in its current permutation."

Pearson, while lamenting the lack of political will for reforms, attacked the media for what he described as a "mutual racism", be it from left or right.

Pearson described the ABC as the "miserable, racist national broadcaster", which was "willing the wretched to fail".

"They need blacks to remain alien from mothers' bosoms, carceral in legions, living short lives of grief and tribulation," he said. "Because, if it was not so, against whom could they direct their soft bigotry of low expectations, about whom could they report misery and bleeding tragedy?"

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

The ABC rejected Mr Pearson's accusations, saying it provided more coverage of Indigenous issues and had a broader Indigenous staffing profile than any other Australian 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," he said.

The spokesman said the ABC had set up units within its radio, television, and news divisions to better reflect Indigenous culture in staffing and storytelling.

"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'."

Pearson also spoke briefly of the treatment of the human rights commissioner, Gillian Triggs, saying Keating would never have abandoned her like the current government.

He said Keating's loyalty, borne of courage and partisanship, often came despite it being to his own political cost.

"Whatever one thinks of the besieged head of the human rights commission, Keating would never abandon Triggs, or indeed [WikiLeaks founder Julian] Assange, to suffer alone," he said.

“I think he stood by my mob for too long for his own good. His opponent 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.”

Keating was present at the launch and praised Pearson, saying he had always thought him to be “Australia’s Obama”.

Keating appeared to again implore Pearson to enter politics for Labor, almost two decades after he was reportedly first offered a safe Labor seat.

“Noel has got to learn one thing in life, like we all have to learn. You have to make commitments,” Keating said. “I made a commitment to the Labor party.

“You’ve got to think, which party has the best path, and can do the tricks, if you show it how to do them.”

Keating also urged Labor to shift back to what he and others have described as the “radical centre” and warned that the pace of change in the information age would cause complex challenges for societies across the globe.

“You have to wonder whether we’re in the last throes of the old world,” he said. “That is, a property developer with no deep political commitments becomes the president of the United States in a very divided economic and political society.

“Europe, in its sort of corset, its straightjacket of a one-size-fits-all monetary policy, and the peripheral space around the Mediterranean of 25% youth unemployment.

“Or the Chinese Communist party trying to consolidate power in the face of the massive transference of wealth and growth of wealth among 1.25bn people.”

Keating rarely agrees to involvement in biographies but was interviewed for Troy Bramston’s Paul Keating: The Big-Picture Leader and described it as the best to date.

Bramston said the words of Keating before publication still rang in his ears.

“‘Troy’, he said. ‘Don’t fuck it up,’” Bramston said.