

Noel Pearson not our leader, say wild river men



David Claudie states his case in Canberra yesterday. "It's no good having a big mine there that just destroys everything." Photo: Glen McCurtayne

Michael Gordon

The Age

September 30, 2010

CAPE York leader David Claudie came to Canberra with a simple message for Tony Abbott yesterday: "Noel Pearson doesn't speak for us," he declared. "He's not our leader." Mr Claudie was among a delegation of traditional land owners who support the Queensland government's legislation that seeks to protect the state's wild rivers.

Mr Pearson has waged a campaign against the legislation, arguing it removes from Aboriginal communities the ability to build an economic base and break the cycle of disadvantage. He was supported yesterday by a report, prepared for the Anglican Church, that asserts the legislation erodes indigenous property rights and will adversely affect remote communities.

Mr Abbott, an unflinching supporter of Mr Pearson, will today lodge a private member's bill designed to overturn the legislation. "If the Prime Minister is serious about indigenous empowerment, she will unlock indigenous land in Cape York," he has said. But Mr Claudie, the chairman of the Chuulangun Aboriginal Corporation, insists the legislation strikes the right balance between allowing development and protecting the rivers.

"We're all looking to care for land and get up sustainable industries," he said, adding the main area of potential development was eco-tourism. "That's why we're down here [in Canberra]. "It's no good having a big mine in there that just destroys everything and makes artificial stuff. People in the world today want to look at genuine, natural stuff, not something that is artificial like a big concrete jungle."

The delegation yesterday met with Mr Abbott and independents Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor. Also pressing the case in Canberra was Queensland's minister for natural resources, Stephen Robertson.

"The Anglican Church today has chosen to express another opinion on Wild Rivers, and we respect the church's right to do that," he said. "But it is wrong for the report to suggest Wild Rivers stifles economic opportunities or impedes sustainable economic development."

Mr Pearson dismissed the criticism of the report, saying the bill proposed by Mr Abbott would allow wild rivers to be declared (and protected) where there was consent from original owners. Those who disagree with him will spend another day lobbying anyone who will listen in Canberra today.