

# Tracker

## Abbott's Cape York listening tour falls on deaf ears

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Opposition leader Tony Abbott.

***NATIONAL:** Tony Abbott spent the weekend doing his brand of a “listening tour” by rolling up his sleeves up and helping renovate a school library in the small Cape York community of Aurukun, writes CHRIS GRAHAM.*

Let's cut to the chase — was it a good thing, or a bad thing? Depends on your perspective. Good if you're looking for a headline.

Not so good if you're looking for a way out of entrenched disadvantage. I'll come back to the latter in a minute.

It's a good thing that Abbott took business leaders with him. Indeed it's great. There was Gerry Harvey and Katie Page (Harvey Norman), Neville Power (boss at FMG), David Peever (Rio Tinto), Graham Hodges (ANZ), Michael Chaney (NAB), and Richard Goyder (Wesfarmers). They all took time out of very busy schedules to cut carpet tiles and assemble book shelves.

An organisation called Gawad Kalinga — based in the Phillipines but recently established in Australia — works on a similar model (albeit without the politics).

The head of Gawad Kalinga, Tony Mellotto (so the story goes) once famously sent a cheque for \$1 million back to a rich American business leader, telling him he wanted his time, not his money.

The man subsequently flew to the Philippines, spent a week building homes in slums, and then promptly donated \$20 million. He apparently still comes back every year or so to help out. And brings rich mates.

So taking Australian business leaders to see a remote Aboriginal community first hand is a bloody good thing. Ten out of 10 on that front.

That's where the praise ends, because there's a few problems with the strategy.

First, acts of Christianity rarely involve a large gaggle of journalists in tow. This is, let's not forget, a publicity stunt. Fair enough, Abbott is a politician, and he's running for election.

But taking journalists from the city with no experience of Aboriginal communities out bush can sometimes lead to reporting like this, from Caroline Overington, in this morning's Oz: "... in a town where fights break out at midnight and people still hit each other with sticks." At least they don't slap people at polling booths.

It can also lead media to wildly plug the Cape York Welfare Reform Trials, with no real understanding of what it is they're supporting, or reporting.

The trials were savaged in Queensland Parliament earlier this year for their "mixed results", at great expense to taxpayers. And by the Liberals, no less. School attendance rates across the trial have pretty much gone nowhere.

And it can lead media to promote the merits of Pearson's reforms at the Aurukun School. For their part, the community credits a lift in performance at the school to the work of Chris Sarra, a lesser-known Aboriginal leader among mainstream journalists, but a legend among the Cape community.

I'm wondering how many Aurukun residents were able to get a word in edgeways, given the number of, in Overington's words, "Type A personalities" in the room.

Secondly, the message Abbott helps to perpetuate with this sort of stunt is the long-held Australian myth that "the real Aborigines live out in the bush".

About 75 percent of the Aboriginal community do not. They live in a large city or town. There are more blackfellas in western Sydney than in Aurukun by a factor of about 28. Indeed, there are about five times as many Aboriginal people within an hour or so drive of Abbott's northern Sydney electorate than there are in the entire Cape York.

If Abbott wanted to paint doors and lay carpet tiles, he could have done it at any one of dozens of Aboriginal missions in NSW.

It would save the taxpayer a great deal of money, and it would send a message that "real Aborigines" live all over the country, not just up north.

Abbott, to his credit, has travelled elsewhere — he famously got lost on a quad bike in Central Australia. And I'm not suggesting he shouldn't go bush — that's where much of the need is. But has Abbott been to Redfern recently? Or West End in Brisbane? I'm yet to recall a visit to a metropolitan or regional Aboriginal community.

Abbott's obsession with Cape York, of course, is because it's politically safe country for him. It's the spiritual home of Noel Pearson.

Pearson, of course, lives by the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" brand of politics that plays out well in middle Australia, and particularly with Abbott.

That's not to suggest the whole of the Cape votes Liberal. They don't. Overwhelmingly, they vote Labor. Pearson, is as much in the minority nationally as he is locally when it comes to his political views.

Finally, what makes me so squeamish about watching Abbott toil away side-by-side with Aboriginal people is that I know that many of them don't know that some of the things he's planning to do to them when he gets in office are pretty nasty, and dripping with dog-whistle politics.

We're a long way out from an election, and the Liberals haven't yet released a comprehensive indigenous affairs policy (and likely won't), but already Abbott has let slip that if he wins government he'll roll his sleeves up and do all sorts of stuff (and not do all sorts of stuff) to fritter away the basic human rights of the good folks of Cape York, and beyond.

A week ago, Abbott announced that he would repeal the section of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA), which makes it illegal to racially vilify someone in a Melbourne newspaper. Only a middle-class white Australian male — i.e. someone who has never needed the protection of the RDA — would suggest something like that.

Abbott has also indicated his party supports constitutional reform, but not in any meaningful way. He supports a preamble that acknowledges Aboriginal people once owned the land, provided it has no real legal meaning.

He does not support removal of the racially discriminatory segments of the constitution, which, in 2012, still permit the government to make laws to harm Aboriginal people simply because they're Aboriginal people.

It's a measure of our nation — and our Opposition Leader (and Prime Minister for that matter) — that we even need to debate whether or not our constitution should or should not be racist. Abbott apparently thinks it should be.

So where does all this lead? Well, from an Aboriginal affairs perspective, Nowheresville.

It's great Abbott took some business leaders to Cape York. It's great that he says he wants to help.

But if Abbott is really interested in discovering the aspirations of Aboriginal people, just once I'd love to see him (or Gillard for that matter) spend a week with Aboriginal leaders who don't share his brand of politics. Where the politics is in fact that of the overwhelming majority of the Aboriginal population.

He should head down to the Ulladulla Local Aboriginal Land Council on the NSW south coast and catch up with Shane Carriage and his mob. Or visit Paul Morris and the crew at the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council (which takes in his electorate).

He'll get a very different message from the one he gets with Pearson's mob.

If he must "go bush", head out to Arnhem Land and see Djiniyini Gondarra. Or head out to the Utopia region, to see Rosalie Kunoth Monks. Or Ampilatwatja to see Richard Downs and Banjo Morton. The list of potential suitors is endless — Dennis Eggington or Marianne McKay in Perth; Doris Stuart in Alice Springs; Gary Foley or Muriel Bamblett in Melbourne; Klynton Wanganeen in Adelaide; Tiga Bayles in Queensland; Gracelyn Smallwood in Townsville.

Abbott will get a different message from any of those leaders. But then, I get a sense this trip was never really about listening in the first place.