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Empowered Communities project stalled since Turnbull took over from Abbott

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- **Michael Gordon**

Noel Pearson calls it the "plain as dog's balls lesson" and he absorbed it the hard way, over the two years of Tony Abbott's failed prime ministership.

Pearson was very close to two prime ministers – Paul Keating and John Howard – before Abbott came along, but this collaboration had promised to be the most rewarding of all.



Noel Pearson says he is at his wit's end, after two years of working closely with the government on behalf of Indigenous people appears to have come to nought. Photo: Josh Robenstone

Abbott, after all, was the self-proclaimed prime minister for Indigenous affairs, whose engagement with Aboriginal Australia was heavily concentrated in Pearson's Cape York, and Pearson, at 50, was in his prime, having devoted half his life to thinking about, advocating and implementing ideas to improve the life prospects of his people.

Fifteen years after publishing *Our Right To Take Responsibility*, his seminal assault on passive welfare, Pearson co-authored a big, bold blueprint to empower Indigenous communities and, with others, proposed a way forward on constitutional recognition.

Yet it all came to next to nought. Nine months after it was delivered, the 165-page *Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples* report is still awaiting a formal response from government, and momentum towards constitutional recognition has stalled. Those behind the empowered communities project summed up their shared frustration in a statement last month that has not been publicly released. "This group of Indigenous leaders with so much knowledge and lived experience, from such varied regions – urban, regional and remote – saw the report as our best opportunity to have our voices heard and our proposals for change considered seriously," they said.

"We did not expect our work to be greeted with the overwhelming silence and lack of engagement that has dragged on now for nearly eight months."

While Abbott spent a week in remote Indigenous Australia in each year of his prime ministership, the disadvantage gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the rest of us widened, rather than narrowed.

This week the Productivity Commission delivered an indictment of the policy failures of successive governments in Indigenous affairs, concluding that it was becoming "increasingly clear" that a number of Closing the Gap targets agreed in 2008 will not be met.

"Despite considerable effort and investment, little or no progress has been made at the national level in closing gaps for life expectancy and reading and numeracy," the commission reported. "Employment gaps have increased rather than narrowed."

For Pearson, the lack of progress has prompted a bout of introspection on both his personal trajectory and the limitations of his strategy of working with the government of the day to advance the cause.

"At a personal level, I'm just at wit's end," he told me in a disarmingly frank interview.

"The last two years, in theory at least, is the closest you can get to power from the outside, and I look back and think, what did that count for?" Very little, it would seem.

And the lesson?

"If I, or any other Indigenous leader, think that it's all dependent on a prime minister, or a government of the day, to do the right thing and to get it right, then we're kidding ourselves," he says.

Pearson has also come to the conclusion that he made the wrong call, 15 years ago, when he decided against a political career. "It was premised on the idea that I would have more influence from the outside, and people have always said to me, 'Yeah, you've got more influence from the outside'. But they just don't know this terrible feeling of impotence."

So what went wrong? Part of the answer came from Abbott himself during his last face-to-face encounter with Pearson, in Brisbane in August. "It's a tough job," Abbott said of the prime ministership, meaning there were so many demands that it was hard to give this area the attention it deserved.

Part of it is the mindset Abbott brought to the task – that the key to making progress is implementing programs aimed at getting children to school, adults to work and making communities safe.

"The fundamental problem with Indigenous affairs is what (Bill) Stanner identified in 1968 when he said that white Australia and its governments just approach this whole scene in terms of one-eyed hobby horses, whether it's health, education or housing, whatever it is," says Pearson.

"Stanner told us in '68 that these one-eyed hobby horses, even if you had 100 of them lined up in a column, won't get you there. The issue is bigger than the individual programs.

"There is a larger problem in the way the wider society recognises the fact that there are an original people with their own culture and languages and that colonial settlement had wreaked great damage and injustice, and provision needs to be made for their recognition and empowerment."

And part of the answer is that Indigenous Australia, with justification, does not believe its voice is being heard or respected. If Pearson feels impotent, imagine the frustration of those who lead the nation's peak Indigenous body, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples.

The chief executive of the Congress, Geoff Scott, confirms an anecdote from when he, Pearson and other Indigenous leaders Pat Dodson, Megan Davis and Kirsty Parker met Abbott in August to discuss the way forward on constitutional recognition.

After the 30-minute meeting, they were in the office of Abbott's chief of staff, Peta Credlin, when Scott suggested it would have been a good idea if Opposition Leader Bill Shorten had been included in the conversation, given the importance of securing bipartisan support.

When Credlin replied that she decided who was invited to meetings in the prime minister's office, Scott turned away, prompting a rebuke that in other circumstances would have led to a walkout. "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" she demanded.

Davis, a professor of law at the University of New South Wales, was outraged but, like her colleagues, let the incident pass in the interests of advancing the recognition cause. "But it was symptomatic of the relationship," she says. "As a polity, that is how we are treated."

The congress leadership have been seeking a meeting with Malcolm Turnbull since he toppled Abbott in September, but still have no appointment.

Jackie Huggins, one of two new congress co-chairs (the other is Rod Little) is hoping Turnbull will follow the example of his new Canadian counterpart, Justin Trudeau, who directed his Indigenous affairs minister Carolyn Bennett to lead the renewal of the relationship between Canada and its first people.

"No relationship is more important to me and to Canada than the one with Indigenous peoples," wrote Trudeau in a "mandate letter" to his minister. "It is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation and partnership."

"We are confident that once we have a meeting with the new Prime Minister, we'll be able to talk up the areas which are of great concern," says Huggins, the author, historian and activist who was a co-chair of Reconciliation Australia. "I'm sure that once he hears our case some doors will be open."

So far, however, there are few grounds for optimism. The membership of the referendum council that was due to be finalised around the time of Abbott's axing is still to be announced, reinforcing the sense of stalled momentum.

"I understand the new PM has many, many issues confronting him, but this one he has let drift," says Scott, who describes the relationship between Indigenous leaders and government as at its lowest ebb in decades. "I can see no difference. The department is paternal in the extreme and condescending and that's the way it's been happening."

Nor has there been any strong indication that the government under Turnbull will respond in any comprehensive way to the empowered communities report.

"I'm concerned that there's a big national conversation going on about reform and Indigenous affairs reform and empowerment is not on that agenda," says Pearson.

"I think we were the first ones to place a comprehensive reform agenda on the table and we have had two months of discussions about national reform and calling for ideas and I haven't seen the word Indigenous pop up."

One consequence of the sense of drift and growing frustration on recognition is that the discussion about the best way forward has broadened among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to include myriad policy issues and the fundamental question of settlement.

"The capacity for us to pull this whole story together is within the country's reach if we understand that there has got to be recognition, there has got to be empowerment and there has got to be an embrace of Indigenous culture," says Pearson.

"If we get those three things right we will break the back of the so-called Indigenous problem.

"I have no doubt that recognition will be on this government's agenda, but recognition alone will be a mirage if we don't have the complementary agenda of empowerment and cultural embrace. You have to be working towards putting those three pieces of the jigsaw together."

Patrick Dodson, 17 years Pearson's senior and arguably the nation's pre-eminent Indigenous voice, gained an appreciation of the dangers of relying on government to do the right thing early in his career. He agrees on the three priorities, though he uses slightly different descriptors.

"There are three big issues that the Aboriginal people in this country are focused on: recognition in the constitution, public policy and settlement," he says.

"If people think that government is going to deliver any of that, they haven't learnt anything from the history of Aboriginal people's advocacy. Nothing is gained without sacrifice and without hardship, no matter how close you might be to a prime minister."

But Dodson says he feels for Pearson. "He placed a lot of trust in the personal relationship, which Indigenous people do," he says. "I don't know whether non-Indigenous people understand that."

For all the disappointment, Pearson carries no ill-will towards Abbott and believes he still has a contribution to make in the area. Indeed, he maintains that, were it not for Abbott's support, the question of recognition might not be on the agenda now.

"It was necessary for a conservative to put constitutional reform on the table. Had that not happened and we had a Prime Minister Turnbull who had to manage a conservative faction in party room, this agenda would have been challenging for him as a progressive liberal."

As for his own course, Pearson says he will continue to advocate from the outside because the alternative of giving up is simply not an option. "The point I've reached is to ask myself: who wants failure? I've just got to readjust my thoughts about what success might be and how to get there."

"He'll get over it. He has to," says Dodson. "As they say in the game, you've just got to cowboy up and get back on the horse."