
Pearson rejects claims of bullying, maladministration

Michael Brissenden reported this story on Monday, November 28, 2016

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: For his response, I'm joined now by Noel Pearson. Mr Pearson, good morning.

NOEL PEARSON: Good morning, Michael.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: You've denied the quotes attributed to you there, those directed at the Queensland Education Minister. But do you accept the broad criticisms and concerns about what some have termed bullying and abusive behaviour?

NOEL PEARSON: That incident that they're referring to is eight years old, in 2009.

It's been the subject of a Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend story in 2012.

It's been the subject of an article by Paul Sheehan in 2014.

So this James Thomas piece is, this morning, is essentially regurgitation of stories that have been reported nationally going back at least four years in relation to an incident eight years ago.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Okay, what about these...

NOEL PEARSON: As with anything like that, you know, there are bits and pieces that are accurate and so on but there's a lot of verballing as well. And I've never sought to, you know, separate the wheat from the chaff.

And I accept that I'm a very passionate and relentless advocate on behalf of reform. And I am surely not the only one who engages in colourful language.

But I completely, completely reject the suggestion that I directed any of those words at Minister Kate Jones in 2009.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Okay, what about these further internal reports of, internal reports of concerns about the bullying?

NOEL PEARSON: You know, just in relation to your introduction, you talk about the \$37 million, I think it's important to let your listeners know that that is in relation to 40 schools across remote Australia, you know, two dozen in Western Australia, two dozen in the Northern Territory and so on, as well as our

schools in Queensland.

In relation to the, so we have a very, very committed organisation. Michael Andrew, the guy that spoke in James Thomas' report there, he's actually the ex-chairman of KPMG International.

So the person in charge of our finances, our audit and risk is the head of KPMG worldwide, and the chairman of the Australian Taxation Board today.

So in terms of governance and administration you could not find a much more committed organisation than ours.

But in relation to bullying, you know, what, I wouldn't say we have a bullying culture at all. What we do have, and I am completely unapologetic about, we have a hard work culture.

This challenge of Indigenous education requires people to be absolutely committed and to work really hard to battle a very egregious problem.

And, you know, some people you come across the occasional employee who likes to conflate a hard work culture with a bullying culture. But none of those claims have ever been made out.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Okay. The Good To Great Schools funding, the \$37 million which you, which we've talked about, that's state and federal funding since 2010, is it true that you've spent \$7 million of that on consultants, and why was that necessary?

NOEL PEARSON: No, no, that's absolutely not true.

The greatest part of our Cape York Academy funding is to employ more teachers because we actually run a long school day. Our school day goes from 8:30 to 4:30 and in order to have, so that we can have a club program.

James Morrison brings his music teachers in to teach our kids saxophone, trumpet. We have a stage band in three of our schools. No other school, let alone Indigenous school, has a music program like ours.

So we can have a language program, a cultural knowledge program that extends to 4:30 in the afternoon.

Now in order to have an extended school day you've got to employ extra teachers, which we do.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Sure, but this figure of, this figure of \$7 million over that time for consultants, and I think it was just over \$3 million last year. Is that, those are not true, is that right?

NOEL PEARSON: Oh, in relation to our national program, our Direct Instruction program is an American-based program.

Five-hundred other schools in Australia use Direct Instruction, by the way, 500.

And so these 40 Indigenous schools use the same program that many, many mainstream schools use.

And we bring in the Americans to help us set up the program, to coach the teachers, train the teachers.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Right, so that spending is on bringing in advisers from America?

NOEL PEARSON: Part of it is, but we've also grown an internal capacity now. We have teachers who've been with us for four, five years who are now out there implementing the program. So we're developing an Australian expertise.

And I imagine that over the next few years our workforce and in the implementation of the program will be entirely Australian.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: So you're the chairman of the board of the Cape York Academy.

NOEL PEARSON: Co-chairman.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Sorry, the co-chairman, okay. Do you - and you say the finances are run essentially by others. But do you accept responsibility over the governance of those finances?

NOEL PEARSON: Okay, absolutely. And our finances are actually posted on the web, as we're required to do as a charity.

But what was misleading about your introduction and about what James Thomas said in his excerpt there is that the audit problems are in relation to Education Queensland's side of the partnership.

It is an audit, the director general of Queensland Education provided to James Thomas an internal audit report in relation to his side of the partnership.

Those audit problems do not concern Good to Great Schools Australia, so how could I accept responsibility for audit problems in the school, which is a responsibility of the department, when I don't even get a copy of the audit report?

I think you, I just want to say one last thing.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Sure.

NOEL PEARSON: James Thomas has a copy of the audit report provided to him by the director general of Queensland Education, but I have not sighted it.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Alright. This story does directly target you and your academy of course, but last week you hit out at the ABC generally, claiming that the ABC as a whole was practising "soft bigotry of low expectations" - I think that's how you put it.

Is the ABC racist?

NOEL PEARSON: You know, this is a microcosm of a wider Australian problem in relation to leftists

and progressives.

You're very good, you know, we - I come from that side as well, right - we are very good at pointing out the problems. And, you know, ABC has been just extraordinary in its exposure of the problems.

The recent story about child protection on Four Corners the other week - you cannot get better journalism than that.

My problem with the ABC, and with the left generally, is that in relation to the solutions that are needed, there's a completely allergic and cultural resistance to those solutions, whether it be welfare reform, whether it be income management, whether it be Direct Instruction pedagogy, all of these things that are actually solutions to those egregious problems that are identified by Four Corners and discussed time and time again.

Every year we get an exposure of the problem. But when it comes to the solutions there seems to be a complete cultural problem with your organisation in dealing fairly with what actually is needed in order to overcome the problems.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Okay, Noel Pearson, we'll have to leave it there. Thanks very much for joining us.

That was Noel Pearson, the director of the Cape York Authority.