
Rundle: Noel Pearson's Aboriginal responsibility act is wearing a bit thin

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Recently, your correspondent has been checking in on the movements of '80s, '70s and even '60s bands across the vastness of the US. Fun fact: they never split up. Those that do, reform. They're all here ricocheting across the country, everyone from Creedence to the Motels, playing casinos and cocktail venues, decades after they last had an album out.

Meanwhile, in Australia, a Paul Keating biography written by Troy Bramston is launched by Noel Pearson. Which is not quite on the level of the J. Geils Band playing the Topeka Auditorium, but it comes close. By now, the audience is all getting on a bit. No one wants anything new. They want the old hits: the dazzling mixture of ego, bullshit, put-down and swagger that for years has functioned as a sort of adrenaline tonic — worked a treat when progressives believed they were cutting with the grain of history. Now, not so much. But one can't help but sense a different reception this time.

Noel Pearson's blast at the ABC as a racist organisation whose journalists and broadcasters actively want Aboriginal people to stay in misery because then they have something to write

about has gained all the attention, because, well, why not? Pearson has spent 20 years advocating “the [indigenous] right to take responsibility” and then blaming everyone else — bureaucrats, social workers, John Howard, enemies of John Howard, and now the ABC — when that fails to occur. It’s a grimly funny act, gone on a bit too long now. Yeah, Noel, ABC journos are undermining your best efforts. That’s why your crackpot externally imposed school system fell apart under the weight of its own contradictions. Not your fault, mate. Never is, when you’re engaged in the important task of taking responsibility.

But that was just the warm-up. The real deal was the mutual swapping of admiration between these two ageing warriors. Keating, according to Pearson, was as great as LBJ, and the failure of the ALP was a product of its abandonment of “reform”. Keating said that what the ALP was getting wrong was not spruiking an “open competitive” economy. Oh, and Pearson should run for Parliament under the Labor banner. It was all held at Barangaroo, a word meaning “mutual tongue-baths” apparently.

Reform! Reform! Moses and the prophets! As Nick Dyrenfurth noted in *The Guardian*, the Keating myth has become a block to new thinking for Labor, not any sort of inspiration. Furthermore it has been greatly manufactured and exaggerated. Keating, as treasurer under Hawke, presided over a hybrid form of liberalisation of the Australian economy, which was either 1) necessary to our not becoming Guatemala, 2) a well-executed mix of straightforward institutional changes that avoided the worst of Thatcherism, or 3) the absolute torpedoing of our last chance to become a genuine social democracy, depending on your politics. Fulfilling that role as junior partner, he was part of a team that won four elections in a row for federal Labor. Keating got the controls, won a hard-fought fifth election, and then, combining further doses of free-market “reform” with aggressive left nationalism, a pivot to Asia, and a cultural elitism, managed to lose to John Howard, a man who, years earlier, had announced his own political death on television.

Whether anyone could have won for Labor in 1996 is unknowable (though the fact that Howard lost the majority vote in 1998 indicates how much the population wanted to not vote Liberal), but Keating lost it in a certain way, one that’s significant for our times.

There are two ways to see Howard’s 1996 victory and Keating’s loss. The first is that Howard was a late example of Thatcher/Reagan, the arrival of such right politics delayed in Australia for a decade, because Labor had done the structural reform that voters elsewhere had contracted the right to do. Because of that, Howard’s politics were tilted more to the cultural than the economic — “comfortable and relaxed” rather than “let’s get moving again”.

But in the wake of the Trump victory, Brexit, and the rise of the European right, another way to see Howard is as an early and mild example of that populist wave — and the Keating years as a harbinger of the sort of politics of Blair/Cameron/Obama/Hillary Clinton that voters have just rejected. In this view, 1996 in Australia was a short prelude to the main event — and one that might have served as a warning had there been sufficient interest in the doings of a small country at the end of the world.

Given that conception, it’s obvious that more “reform” of the type suggested — the open, striving, dynamic world Keating raves about — would not only be a disastrous thing for Labor to offer, but was pretty disastrous at the time. People don’t and didn’t want “reform” per se; they wanted whatever works to sustain and extend lives that are, by their very nature, pretty settled. It’s politicians like Keating and sympathetic media types who assume that everyone shares their

restless and relentless ambition for the new, the open, the global, etc, etc.

So, though no one finds Labor, as it is now, inspiring to the slightest degree, its ideas-free, reactive, cautiously economically nationalist policy may well be a better strategy than any grand notions of Reform! — especially if by “reform” it is meant simply a grab bag of policies that appeal to the globalisers, progressives on the left, free-market to the right. Stuff about embracing Asia, etc, turning a back on the US alliance etc is exactly the sort of thing that many people feel to be a progressive/business elite strategy, with all sorts of contents — denial of a specific national history, attacks on working rights and condition (via the “dynamic” global labour market) — that they don’t want. Part of the reason Keating lost so badly in 1996 is that he adopted the attitude of a cultural left that he often scorns (and just as often parrots): that any disquiet about rapid social-cultural change was racist and xenophobic. Too many on the left were cowed by this sort of nonsense. There is nothing anti-racist about acting as the left flank of a corporate move to expand markets, remove regulation and undermine conditions, labelled as “openness”.

It’s not merely Keating’s myth that is now serving as a net negative for Labor’s hopes; his actual advice and ideas are terrible, too. Such as the idea that Noel Pearson could be inveigled into Parliament and serve as some sort of “inspiration”. The sad truth about Pearson is that he has largely failed at what he set out to do, and a measure of the failure is due to his own lack of ability at certain aspects of politics. Nearly two decades after “Our Right To Take Responsibility”, Cape York is no better off than any half-a-dozen indigenous communities you could pick at random. Worse, perhaps, is that umpteen millions of dollars have flown into it, as a place for social experiment. Pearson has been celebrated by backers in the political, financial and media world as “the man to end symbolism” in Aboriginal affairs.

They have supported him long beyond the indulgence they would grant to anyone they had ordinary business or political dealings with. Pearson now serves as a symbol of the war against symbolism in Aboriginal affairs. Far from going into Parliament, he should consider withdrawing to academia and giving someone else a go in Cape York. He can assist them with a deep study of the failure to advance, how much of it was due to large-scale historical conditions, and how much arose from strategic and tactical failures, arrogance and hubris, his own and others.

Above all, no more tours by the ’80s crew. Labor will soon be facing both the Greens challenge from its progressive left, and a nativist One Nation (or successor) challenge from its right. It will be lucky to emerge from that with a solid 30% primary vote. In putting together a new vision to attract a majority, it will need to find a new formula that reconciles the demands for settled community with the universal human values that animate a labour movement in the first place. The last thing that will help in that are the priorities and fantasies of the Keating era, now concluded.