

Noel Pearson says 'soft bigotry' of the left the biggest challenge to Indigenous reform

Aboriginal leader says low expectations of 'false progressives' for Indigenous people has trapped reformers such as himself in a 'zero-sum game'



In a speech in Brisbane, Indigenous leader Noel Pearson said: 'We will die in the arms of the false progressives whom we mistakenly think are on our side.' Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

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Noel Pearson has declared the “soft bigotry” of Australia’s progressive left in education, the environmental movement and media as “the most fundamental challenge to Indigenous reform in our country”.

The Aboriginal leader amplified his recent attack on the ABC with a sweeping indictment of “the left” generally over Indigenous policy failure, a critique he credited to an unlikely source, former US president George W Bush.

In a speech in Brisbane, Pearson said the low expectations of “false progressives” for Indigenous people and their habit of attacking policy geared towards their social and economic advancement had trapped reformers such as himself in a “zero-sum game”.

“We will die in the arms of the false progressives whom we mistakenly think are on our side, but they harbour a basic bigotry towards our humanity and oppose our

dignity at too many turns,” he told an audience at an event organised by his organisation, Good to Great Schools Australia.

Pearson’s public airing of this critique comes as his involvement in Queensland Indigenous schools hangs in the balance amid efforts to limit the use of his Direct Instruction (DI) curriculum.

It also follows his broadsides against the ABC, which themselves came on the heels of ABC reporting on issues linked to the use of DI in those schools, the role of Pearson’s organisation and accounts of abusive language used by him in exchanges with government figures.

Pearson said the left’s “soft bigotry” – which rejected the idea that social change was the product of individual agency, putting disadvantage down to “the structures of inequality” – was the “most important idea in race relations since the advent of civil rights”.

He said the “basic hypocrisy” of the left came from double standards such as “the greens who prioritise conservation over Indigenous development needs”.

Pearson said there was a “relativism” of the left towards “the poor generally”, a “class aspersion” where their expectations for people they wanted to help fell short of their expectations for themselves.

“The relativism appears to reflect an acceptance or sensitivity to ethnicity and culture, but in fact it cloaks double standards, where the progressive purveyors fail to ask themselves: what would I want for myself and my children if I was in the same circumstance,” Pearson said.

“The answer that you would like to participate in economic development, have jobs, not be on welfare and so on – is not a question the purveyors of this culture ask themselves.”

This prejudice was “even worse in its effects” than “hard bigotry” and confronting it had succeeded the fight against racial discrimination as “the most important development in the cause of human dignity” in the first half of the 21st century, he said.

“Australia and the world needs to wake up to it. This form of prejudice wreaks a massive toll on the marginalised and perpetuates great social injustice,” he said.

Pearson said the vexed public reaction to this idea when he first raised it against the ABC last month showed it was “completely foreign to thinking people”.