



Noel Pearson's Education Agenda

by Chris Sarra

Placing his programs in the 'radical centre' is a misnomer

I have long regarded with some amusement Noel Pearson's frequent assertions that he belongs to the 'radical centre'. Morgan Brigg and Lyndon Murphy have recently criticised Pearson's stance because it means he operates within the 'dynamics of settler politics' and is not grounded in Aboriginal difference. As such he cannot provide the basis for a true post-colonial politics.

I am sympathetic to aspects of this critique, but I believe it fails to grasp fully the rhetorical thrust of the 'radical centre' stance. Importantly, it serves to deflect criticism of the cost and intellectual basis of the social experiments Pearson has conducted by casting potential critics as coming either from the 'racist Right' or the 'bleeding-heart Left'. In his criticisms of me, and because of the questions I have raised as an educator, I have somehow ended up being cast to the Left.

I don't have a problem being cast to the Left, but there are many things wrong with such efforts to stereotype alternative viewpoints. First and foremost, it stifles or tries to render invalid any reasonable effort to challenge, question or debate the real issues at hand. The consequent absence of meaningful dialogue leaves us all diminished, but tragically none more so than the Aboriginal people who have had to endure his 'programs'.

I will be frank and say that Pearson's education agenda and his costly, ineffective social experiments have not worked, as Amy McQuire recently outlined in *New Matilda*. If it weren't for the negative effects on Aboriginal people it might be a wryly amusing window onto governments' attachment to the man they believe represents Aboriginal Australia. But indeed it's not amusing at all—it's tragic. From my perspective as an educator with thirty years' experience in Aboriginal education, with recognised success in educational and community terms, it is my strong belief that Pearson, and in particular his uninformed and naive assumptions in the education-policy space, have set us back at least fifteen years in our

pursuit of educational excellence for all Indigenous students. It is heartbreaking to reflect on the many tens of millions of taxpayer dollars wasted on educational ideas that have been proven *not* to work. A recent review of the education program at the Cape York Academy schools shows it does not even satisfy the basic requirements of the Australian Curriculum standards.

Let us set to one side the separatist impulse behind Brigg and Murphy's critique. Let us follow Pearson onto the terrain of the politics he espouses and ask: are his ideas really of this 'radical centre' he has invented for himself, this place where he might cocoon himself from intellectual challenge?

Undoubtedly he is an extremely controversial figure as a darling of the political and corporate elites, yet there is no escaping the paradox that while he is described as an Aboriginal leader he is anything but a leader of Aboriginal people. As noted by other Aboriginal commentators, he is held in contempt by many Aboriginal people, a fact Pearson himself acknowledges.

It is vital we grasp that Pearson's argument sets up the debates around educational policy in divisive terms of Left and Right, with Pearson claiming the moral high ground of the radical centre. On intelligent reflection it is hard to see how his views can be considered anything but a hard core of right-wing ideas, given the ideology that anchors them.

Ideology! There, I said it!

In this self-made, critique-free cocoon called the radical centre any talk of ideology is demonised as if it were anathema to making tangible progress on the ground. The problem here though is that the ideas and those who are strident supporters of them are all inculcated in an ideology that is so pervasive that these supporters don't seem to know it exists. In reality the ideas and the programs manifesting from them surf a very right-wing, neoliberal zeitgeist.

So, if such ideas are not actually of the centre, can they be considered radical?

Let's look at just one of the 'radical' ideas: Direct Instruction, the highly scripted education product procured from the United States for Aurukun's schools. One only has to scratch the surface to realise that there is nothing radical about this approach, and on closer inspection we can see that it is based on ideas that were inflicted upon Aboriginal people during the mission days of the last century. Anyone who understands education and teaching methods

will know that the methods prescribed by the Direct Instruction product, which has cost Australian taxpayers \$30 million, resemble a style of teaching from the 1950s. The teacher reads a prescribed American script and children respond like parrots by repeating what the teacher has just said. It is a form of rote learning without any intellectual substance that might cause children to think and analyse more deeply. Even more bizarre is that children in a remote Aboriginal school learn about Thanksgiving Day and other prominent American symbols and contexts.

On carefully choreographed visits to such classrooms, journalists and politicians get a wonderful impression that teaching and learning are occurring. For those who know little about education, it may look like learning is occurring, and often for politicians the perception that something is working is more important than the reality. But evaluative evidence clearly demonstrates that learning is not occurring—indeed students have been alienated, with a large proportion becoming disengaged entirely.

Of further concern is evidence that the best-quality teachers are leaving schools where the Direct Instruction product is being forced upon them. Those quality teachers who remain because they love the children and the communities they work in often feel demoralised and de-skilled. At the last two teachers' conferences where I have spoken, some of those teachers who were forced to use Direct Instruction have come to me afterwards to express a sense of grief and outrage at how demoralised they feel in our profession. These teachers' sense of grief and outrage has been exacerbated by a sense of complete powerlessness to express their views, for fear of being abused or losing their job. Against this background any educator can see that Direct Instruction is in fact having a very negative effect on one of the key factors of success in remote Aboriginal schools: the presence of quality teachers with a high sense of purpose and efficacy.

Direct Instruction is just one of the ideas proffered as radical when actually it can be seen more readily to reflect ideologies, programs and ways of thinking about Aboriginal people that were well entrenched last century. Similarly, welfare-reform programs, alcohol-management programs and income-management programs, all of which have cost many millions of dollars, seemingly reflect a yearning for the 'good old days' of the Aboriginal missions. The truth is that, while some might reflect fondly upon that period, we can never properly say that a time when Aboriginal people were controlled, without any prospect of authentic emancipation, was somehow 'the good old days'.

Let's stop kidding ourselves about this and understand that if we want to try something truly radical in the Aboriginal policy space we need what is called a 'high-expectations relationship' with students, their communities and service providers. A Stronger Smarter philosophy for schools is designed for high-expectations relationships that honour the humanity of Aboriginal people, and in so doing acknowledges their strengths, capacity and human right to emancipatory opportunity.

This is a truly radical idea!

Call me a left-winger if you like, but from my perspective a high-expectations relationship is the only way to go if we are to contemplate an honourable way forward for the education of Aboriginal children. Relationships are hard, though, and in some ways the toughest challenge for all of us is to accept our failings, or the fact that on some occasions our ideas and beliefs might actually be wrong. If we can get past this we might actually fulfil our potential to be exceptional within the framework of a high-expectations relationship. A high-expectations relationship is the only relationship in which a sense of hope resides, and a sense of hope, and a sense of being exceptional, is our only chance to transcend the challenges we face together.