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Pearson yet to learn lessons of leadership

TONY KOCH | THE AUSTRALIAN | APRIL 28, 2012 12:00AM [SAVE](#)



Noel Pearson discusses welfare reform with former Queensland premier Peter Beattie in 1999. Picture: Paul Wager Source: The Australian

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In April 2012, multiple Walkley Award winning journalist Tony Koch revealed that after writing a story about alleged fraud at the Djarragun College in Cairns – a school Pearson strongly backed – he says Pearson phoned him.

"[He] didn't think the story should be written, and he blasted me down the phone, telling me that I was a "f ... ing disgrace" who had "made a living out of the misery of Aboriginal people".

Koch, who worked closely with Pearson for 15 years, described him as a brilliant intellect and great orator, but said he also possessed a "bitter tongue".

"I can't say why I've never publicly criticised Pearson for this kind of behaviour before. Perhaps I thought his sudden outbursts and his often bitter tongue were part of the price we had to pay for his brilliance.

"Was I too thrilled, especially in the early years, at the sight of Pearson, burning bridges and stepping on toes, saying what nobody else would say, in his bid to save Aboriginal Australia?

"I suppose because I'm older than Pearson, I also figured he would grow humbler over time and the grace that comes with age would strengthen him as a leader.

"I imagined him reaching out to others, taking wise counsel, drawing an ever-wider circle of influence, as he sought to improve the plight of his people.

“It pains me to say the opposite has happened: Pearson's profile has blossomed, but so has his ego, and while that is only human, there have been consequences. Instead of drawing people into his orbit, Pearson has succeeded in pushing almost everyone away.

“In recent weeks, as he stepped up a new and extraordinarily expensive campaign for more funds for Cape York schools, he has taken to berating people who could actually teach him a thing or two.”

In defence of Pearson, all of the witnesses at Garma who New Matilda spoke to acknowledged his presentation on the Empowered Communities model was outstanding.

One witness described as “hands down the best speech I’ve ever seen delivered by an Aboriginal person”.

“He was fantastic. He really provided a good reasoning of what [Empowered Communities] was. I think people were really interested in the concept because of the standard of the leadership [promoting it].

“I think that’s important to acknowledge because there’s a real disconnect between what happened later on.”

The Empowered Communities group includes leaders from eight regions around Australia: North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, Sydney and the Central Coast of NSW, the Murray Goulburn region of Victoria, the Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, the East and West Kimberley regions of Western Australia and the NPY lands in the Central Desert region that borders South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The Empowered Communities website notes: “Members of the group have been collaborating informally for many years. Since June, a representative from each region has sat on a Steering Committee to guide the Empowered Communities work. Through this, they have been working to establish formalised collaboration mechanisms and to develop a proposal for reform to the interface between Indigenous people and government.”