

---

## **Pearson right to demand action before abstraction**

Author: Dennis Glover

***Australian***

20 July 2007

*Dennis Glover is a speechwriter for the Labor Party.*

***For all his support of the Howard Government's Aboriginal initiatives, Noel Pearson remains a man of the Left, says Dennis Glover***

"A Singular intellectual." It's a telling description once made of French writer and Resistance figure Albert Camus that alluded to his willingness, when necessary, to stand alone.

A towering literary figure, Camus is remembered politically as a man of the Left who fell out with old comrades because he put safety from actual oppression before the pursuit of abstract freedoms.

Asked once why he refused to support the violent nationalist revolt in his birthplace, Algeria, where his mother still lived, Camus famously said that if it came to a choice between liberty and his mother, he would choose his mother.

Watching Noel Pearson over recent weeks, I have been struck by the many similarities with Camus.

Pearson, too, rates physical safety ahead of abstract human rights. He is wary of progressive ideologies: faced by the choice between children and rights, he correctly chose children. And he isn't afraid to align himself with the Right if that's what it takes.

But in my view he remains in essence a man of the Left. Pearson is a rare commodity: a moralist who deserves to be taken seriously by practical people. Like Camus, he is a singular intellectual.

Pearson's case for supporting the commonwealth's intervention into indigenous communities is extraordinary for its forceful assertion of a simple proposition: that the institutions, programs and ideas cherished by affluent progressives must come second to saving frightened poor children from fear, humiliation and abuse. It's an argument searing in its moral clarity and one addressed mainly to the Left, for whom Pearson intentionally sets higher standards than for the Right.

Sadly, Pearson's success in influencing change contrasts with the continuing ineffectiveness of much of the mainstream Australian Left.

There's little sense on the Left these days of the sort of moral crusade and singularity of purpose that Pearson brings to the fight. In my view, the Left would do best to regard Pearson not as an enemy but as a change agent who exemplifies what the Left needs to do to regain the ascendancy: combine moral clarity with fresh ideas.

Crucially, he has demonstrated that this task requires significant investment in ideas and people, as he has done through the Cape York Institute. The new Family Responsibilities Commission to be set up in the Cape, for instance, with its new forms of collective social responsibility, potentially points the way for social democrats as they seek to rebuild the legitimacy of the wider welfare state.

That said, it would be wrong to regard Pearson as beyond criticism. No one is. I think he underestimates the importance of political motive.

Although Pearson may not care whether John Howard is or isn't attempting to exploit the indigenous child safety issue for electoral gain, it is nonetheless a significant moral and practical question; a second-order question to be sure, but still one with huge implications for reconciliation, symbolic and practical.

The commonwealth's indigenous child safety initiative has strong bipartisan support. Kevin Rudd is 100per cent behind it. Even initially sceptical premiers and chief ministers have got on board.

While we all hope politics is kept out of this issue, it is naive in the extreme to think electoral calculation will not influence decision making. What no one has yet pointed out is that the biggest threat to maintaining a consensus comes not from Labor but from the Coalition. There is no electoral gain for Labor in opposing the saving of children from abuse, but there is potential gain for the Coalition in painting Labor as obstructionist.

This is where the precedent of the Tampa asylum-seeker stand-off is instructive. We will know the Government is trying to use its action in the Northern Territory as a Tampa-style wedge if it goes out of its way during the coming weeks to make it difficult for Labor to maintain its bipartisan support.

The test will come when we see the proposed enabling legislation.

If that legislation is provocatively disproportionate, if it contains ideologically inspired measures unrelated to the protection of children and if it is hurled across the table in a support it or be damned fashion -- as was the initial border protection bill that followed the Tampa's arrival -- then it will be obvious that Howard is playing politics with the issue.

The Prime Minister has every right to hope people will vote for him if he does the right thing and saves those children -- that's what democracy should be all about: reward for doing the right thing -- but it becomes a different moral equation if children are used deliberately as an electoral weapon.

Every right-thinking Australian is hoping the Prime Minister restrains himself. But if he doesn't, and vulnerable children become a tool of Machiavellian manoeuvre, then

the creation of a bipartisan commitment to indigenous welfare will be set back once again.

And that would be the greatest tragedy of all because it would potentially condemn another generation of Australian children to unnecessary abuse and neglect.

Inevitably, some will want the Howard intervention to fail; they deserve nothing but total moral condemnation. If good people fear the Government's intervention in the NT will be used as a wedge, it's not because they want the commonwealth's intervention to fail -- as Pearson has suggested -- but because they want it to succeed.

If any party, including the Coalition parties, uses this issue to divide Australians, then Pearson should use his towering moral authority to bring them to book.

***Dennis Glover*** is a speechwriter for the Labor Party.