

Pearson's dread of Rudd in power

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Kevin Rudd has been taught his first harsh lesson in Aboriginal politics. The attack on Rudd mounted yesterday by indigenous leader Noel Pearson is inspired by distrust of the man who would become prime minister.

Pearson feels the anger of betrayal. He thinks that Rudd and Labor talk with forked tongues on indigenous policy. Pearson was rocked on Friday morning when he read Rudd's interview in *The Australian* making clear that the referendum on Aboriginal reconciliation -- as pledged by John Howard -- was not a Rudd priority.

This referendum is ALP policy. But it is no priority of Rudd's. During the campaign there has been almost no focus on Howard's remarkable pledge that if re-elected he would introduce a bill into parliament within 100 days for a referendum that he would hold within 18 months.

Howard personalised this promise. Indeed, Howard declared that only he could carry such a referendum because he would deliver conservative Australia behind the cause of constitutional recognition of the indigenous people.

The media reaction was contemptuous. There was virtually no debate of the issue or assessment whether Howard's claim might be right. There was virtually no pressing of Rudd on how he might carry the referendum, the approach he would adopt, the importance he assigned to the issue. Given the emphasis on symbolic reconciliation during the past 11 years, this is an extraordinary situation.

Now it emerges that Rudd does not intend to hold such a referendum in his first term anyway.

The essence of Pearson's charge is that Rudd has deceived indigenous leaders: he defused Aboriginal issues at the outset by leaving the impression he was fully committed to the referendum when, it appears, this was not the case.

In his interview with *The Australian*, Rudd was patronising of Howard. He understood that Howard might want to change significantly his stance by calling a referendum, Rudd said. But Rudd's own priority was ``closing the gap". He spoke at length and with passion about getting the right policies and benchmarks to improve Aboriginal living conditions, a stand on practical reconciliation almost identical to Howard's.

The Rudd interview was too much for Pearson. He vented his alarm in an interview with *The Australian* yesterday morning, at a press conference and in the article below

that he fired off during the day.

Pearson has put any Rudd government on notice. The depth of his suspicion of Rudd's intentions is profound. Accusing Rudd of ``an absolute betrayal" of indigenous people, Pearson declared: ``I dread a Rudd prime ministership." His message for Rudd was personal as well as political, that Rudd needs to change his ways.

There will be many Aboriginal leaders who do not share Pearson's views or who share his sentiments but disagree with their publication. Many will think an attack on Rudd now most unwise. Prominent indigenous leader Lowitja O'Donoghue, a strong Howard critic, said she looked forward to a Rudd government.

Asked by The Australian what was his message to Rudd, Pearson replied: ``It is that the quest for indigenous reconciliation must be an up-front part of the first term agenda. You cannot now retreat to practical reconciliation that Labor has repudiated for the past 10 years." Pearson said reconciliation must be both symbolic and practical. ``We got Howard to the point where he backed a symbolic agenda and Rudd is saying, no, let's just rewind the tape," Pearson said.

The nub of Pearson's argument is that Howard has set up the politics for the successful passage of this referendum, but Labor doesn't want to know about it.

``There is this notion that Rudd will come good in his second or third term," Pearson said. ``That's not what we expect. We expect to see Rudd capitalise on and complete Howard's constitutional commitment. That's what we expect. Rudd should say that he wants Australian conservatives to honour Howard's pledge. This referendum can only be passed with the support of the conservatives. If you allow Howard's commitment to rot on the vine, then you cannot expected to get that support."

This will become a major embarrassment for Rudd. Can he walk away from a political test that Howard wanted to submit and carry? How will indigenous leaders respond? Did they take Howard seriously or will they suffer in silence if Rudd buries the referendum for his first term? Is Rudd a more conservative leader on indigenous issues than Howard?

The answers to these questions are not known. The lesson of the election campaign, however, is that it is past time such questions were raised.

Pearson put much emphasis on the October 11 statement by Rudd and shadow indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin. It said that ``Labor offers bipartisan support" for Howard's referendum and this was ``regardless of the outcomes of the federal election".

They said bipartisan backing was necessary to carry the measure.

``There was no equivocation in my view," Pearson said. ``I will not stand silent while a contender in this election reneges so flagrantly on a commitment he made on day one of the campaign." Pearson said he had been ``seriously misled".

``During the campaign I was alarmed at Labor's backtracking on the Northern Territory intervention. Labor campaigned against intervention both in the NT and in indigenous communities," Pearson said.

``But I kept my counsel and my concerns. For the duration of the campaign I was satisfied we had a bipartisan commitment. So I kept my powder dry. Then 48 hours before the vote I read that Rudd won't be putting the referendum if he wins. This is an absolute heartless abandonment of indigenous people. We have been misled. My reaction is one of absolute devastation and betrayal. This is not what they promised and we will hold them accountable."

In his interview with *The Australian*, Pearson revealed one of his deepest fears: that indigenous affairs under Labor would become an issue for political management without any genuine search for solutions.

It was, in effect, a double fear that Labor's spin doctors would favour the political management approach and its progressive wing would favour solutions that didn't work and were proven failures.

The lack of trust Pearson displays towards a Rudd government is a problem that needs a resolution. Asked by *The Australian* yesterday, Macklin confirmed that Labor's policy was for a referendum. There is no qualification on this.

The issue in dispute may just be the timing. Labor has not specified the timing. The tone and content of Pearson's remarks, however, suggests a far deeper problem. It is not just the history between Rudd and Pearson in Queensland. Pearson thinks Rudd has played politics on the referendum for his own interests and against the interests of indigenous Australians. The question remains: will Labor lose Howard's referendum?