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Cape crusader

Noel Pearson commands huge respect among black and white Australians alike – but is there more to him than meets the eye?

By Jane Cadzow.
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The meeting began cordially enough. A Queensland government delegation was in Cairns to confer with Noel Pearson, the most influential indigenous leader in the country. Pleasantries were exchanged as people took their places around the table, then the room fell silent while everyone waited respectfully for him to speak.

What followed, according to former parliamentarian Stephen Robertson, was "a tirade of expletives and abuse", including, more than once, the phrase "f…ing white c…s". Robertson, a minister in the state's then Labor government, still isn't sure why he didn't protest or walk out. "To this day, I regret not pulling him up," he says. Instead, he sat transfixed, pinned to his seat, as Pearson excoriated his visitors – "starting very slowly, very deliberately, and speaking quite softly, then over the next 15 or 20 minutes reaching a crescendo".

"Enormous presence"… Noel Pearson. Photo: Jesse Marlow for The AFR Magazine Power Issue, August 2011

Among those present was state environment minister Kate Jones, whose female adviser was dismissed by Pearson as an "arse-wipe". Robertson says his own chief-of-staff, an indigenous man, was called a "sell-out c…". Another member of the group sums up the rest of the diatribe: "'You f…ing white c…s', scream, scream, scream. Full on, for half an hour. Nobody could get a word in." This delegate wasn't completely taken aback, having felt the force of

Pearson's temper on previous occasions. "You think, 'Well, there's no point in arguing with him.' It's like being in church and being told to repent for your sins."

Robertson, who had always regarded Pearson highly, was shocked by the contrast between the raging person in front of him and the composed, charismatic character of popular perception. "Noel makes it very easy for middle Australia to like him," he says three years later. "But scratch the surface a little and there is quite a different Noel Pearson, who middle Australia has never seen."

Pearson has long been lauded as an inspirational figure to both black and white Australians. Now 47, he made his mark in the early 1990s as an eloquent advocate for Aboriginal land rights and a key negotiator in the drafting of the federal Native Title Act. "This was a young, very intelligent, highly articulate person standing up for indigenous rights," says Warren Pitt, a former Queensland indigenous affairs minister, "and everyone wanted to promote him."

Floating ideas ... Noel Pearson with Tony Abbott on the Morgan River in Queensland last year.

Since then, Pearson has attained statesmanlike stature. Senior parliamentarians and bureaucrats not only trek to north Queensland to see him, they have allocated millions of dollars in funding to his think tank, the Cape York Institute. Tens of millions more in government grants have gone to a network of organisations set up by Pearson to help Aboriginal communities on the Cape to help themselves. His conviction that self-reliance should replace dependence on welfare has been so enthusiastically embraced by both sides of politics that one observer refers to "the cult of Noel". The National Trust of Australia lists him as a national living treasure. "He's a bit of a messiah to some people – whether young indigenous people or middle-class Australia," says Pitt.

Corporate types are in awe of him, too. "He's one of the smartest people I've ever met – a prodigious intellect," says Colin Carter, a founding partner of the Australian branch of Boston Consulting Group and a long-time supporter of Pearson's. It seems to Carter that, even if Pearson has a spiky side, his foibles should be weighed against "his huge and beneficial

impact on our country". Geniuses are often flawed, Carter says. "I cut great people a bit of slack."

Pearson is one of those individuals who effortlessly dominate a room. "He has enormous presence," says someone who watched him at last year's meetings of the federal government's advisory panel on constitutional recognition of indigenous Australians. "Noel would spend a lot of time looking as though he wasn't terribly interested, but when he spoke, you could hear a pin drop." Environmental activist Lyndon Schneiders says Pearson had that same commanding quality in his 20s, when he co-founded the Cape York Land Council. "He's an incredibly charming man when he chooses to be," says Schneiders, who was always aware of a steely streak. "He was a hard guy who played hard politics and didn't take any prisoners."

Now national campaign director of the Wilderness Society, Schneiders says that during the several years he worked closely with Pearson and his right-hand man, older brother Gerhardt, he witnessed vituperative attacks on people who displeased them. "They called it 'bombing'," Schneiders says. "When they were going to go in and make their views forcefully known to government, they were going on a 'bombing raid'. I watched them do it to advisers, to backbenchers, to ministers, to journos. It wasn't pretty."

Watch and learn ... Pearson with his son, Charlie, on his lap, at the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy, Aurukun campus, in 2010. Photo: Fairfaxsyndication.com

Over the course of Warren Pitt's ministerial career, he grew increasingly concerned by Pearson's apparent sway over the Queensland government and his tendency to browbeat anyone standing in his way. "Public servants have been called everything under the sun," says Pitt, who retired in 2009 and was subsequently commissioned by the government to assess how best to distribute $6 million in mining royalties to Pearson's home community of Hope Vale, on the eastern Cape about 400 kilometres north of Cairns. After consulting with residents, Pitt recommended against giving the money to a body called the Congress of Clans, which he believed was unduly influenced by Pearson and the Cape York Land Council. His report, made public in later court proceedings, alleged the Pearson brothers had a "track record of bullying" through the land council.

Despite Pitt's advice, the government awarded the Congress the $6 million, along with trusteeship of 110,000 hectares of land. The Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire Council challenged the decision, but in May this year lost a legal bid to have it overturned. A few days later, Gerhardt was charged with the alleged assault late last year of the shire council's chief executive, Lee Robertson. The case is due to be heard in November.

Just the beginning ... Pearson with then PM Paul Keating at a 1996 press conference to announce the Cape York land-use agreement. Photo: Fairfaxsyndication.com

Setting out to write this story, I request an interview with Noel Pearson. His media spokesman, Lew Griffiths, says he is unavailable: he has taken extended leave to work on a book and spend time with his family – Pearson's wife, Tracey Kluck, had their third child last November. Griffiths agrees to ask Gerhardt if I can talk to him instead.

It turns out that the Cape York Land Council is closely linked to three other organisations controlled by Noel and Gerhardt Pearson: the Cape York Institute, which develops social policy and runs a youth leadership program; Cape York Partnerships, which implements educational and welfare reform; and the Cape York Development Corporation, known as Balkanu, which sets out to foster economic and social enterprise. "They're tight little bodies that receive a shitload of funding and have an enormous amount of power," says Lyndon Schneiders, who suggests it is difficult to overestimate the clout the Pearsons wield in the continent's northernmost region. Noel Pearson may never have stood for public office but, thanks to political and corporate patronage, "he and his associates have got a pretty tight grip on almost everything that happens on the peninsula", Schneiders says.

To David Claudie, a traditional land owner, it seems wrong that taxpayer dollars earmarked for the Cape are funnelled through the Pearsons' organisations. "Noel is trying to make Cape York his own empire," says Claudie, pointing out that many Cape residents do not support Pearson and resent the presumption that he knows what is best for them. "He's only a self-appointed leader for indigenous people," Claudie says. "In indigenous society, we have our *own*leaders."

A couple of weeks pass. No response from Gerhardt. Whenever I speak to Lew Griffiths, he is testy and evasive. Then one day he phones with dismaying news: Noel Pearson has been undergoing treatment for a serious illness – later reported to be lymphoma – for the past several months. "He is in remission," Griffiths says, and expects to be back in his office by early September. But under the circumstances, do I really want to go ahead with a story that is likely to include criticisms of Pearson and raise questions about his Cape York organisations? Griffiths suggests I think long and hard about that. Would such a story be in the public interest? Would it benefit "the kids of Cape York, who are starting to see a future for themselves"?

In April, *The Australian* newspaper published a remarkable column by Tony Koch, the journalist who has done more than anyone to turn Pearson into a celebrity, writing hundreds of articles supporting him and his ideas. This last piece, quite different in tone, was prompted by Koch's discovery that one of his female colleagues had been verbally savaged by Pearson after she wrote something he didn't like.

"I wish I could say I was surprised to hear he had behaved so awfully towards somebody who really didn't deserve it," Koch said in his column. "But the sad truth is, I wasn't."

He himself had been lambasted by Pearson, he admitted, most viciously after he wrote about Djarragun College, a north Queensland indigenous school accused of fraudulently claiming $5.5 million in government funding by falsifying student numbers. Pearson – who has since taken over the college, rescuing it from the threat of closure – "blasted me down the phone," Koch wrote, "telling me that I was a 'f…ing disgrace' who had 'made a living out of the misery of Aboriginal people'. "

Pearson's attacks on journalists are certainly nothing new – in 1999, he showed what he thought of a question from ABC radio interviewer Sharon Molloy by tipping a glass of water over her head – but mostly such incidents have gone unreported. "I can't say why I've never publicly criticised Pearson for this kind of behaviour before," Koch wrote. "Perhaps I thought his sudden outbursts and his often bitter tongue were part of the price we had to pay for his brilliance." Or perhaps Koch had come to regard Pearson, who was given a regular column in *The Australian* and was the newspaper's 2005 Australian of the Year, as being somehow beyond reproach. "I would like to say I was not blind to his faults – his tendency to carry into a room a whiff of intellectual superiority, for example, that can at times veer dangerously close to abrasive arrogance," Koch wrote, "but I did sometimes turn a blind eye."

In that, he was by no means alone. "Noel has never been held accountable for all these things and never will be," says a retired senior Queensland government official. "I mean, he has an enormous amount of credibility. And I don't know that there's an advantage in tearing him down. I know this sounds like reverse prejudice: if he was a white person he should be put under a lot more scrutiny. But you need indigenous leaders." The former official remembers counselling a public servant who told him she had received a vitriolic phone call from Pearson. Though distressed, she did not want to make a formal complaint: "She had the view that indigenous people had been badly treated for so long that she should be prepared to turn the other cheek."

The unwritten policy of tolerating Pearson's tantrums seems to former state minister Stephen Robertson an indication of the depth of goodwill towards him. "It's also about the commitment of those people who sit across the table from Noel to try to get solutions to the sometimes intractable problems impacting on indigenous people," he says. "They sit there and cop it because the bigger game is getting some agreements in place that actually get things done." At the Cairns meeting, for instance, Robertson and the rest of the delegation waited until Pearson had finished hurling invective at them, then everyone – including Pearson – knuckled down and worked through the agenda. "Simply getting up and walking out, while that would have been a reasonable response, would not have achieved anything," Robertson says.

Besides, no one wants to get into a fight with the man widely regarded as the voice of reason in the ongoing debate over indigenous policy. "Given his high profile, and his high standing across Australia, premiers and prime ministers are inclined to do their best to have him onside," says Desley Boyle, who was Queensland indigenous affairs minister for two years to 2011. "That nervousness about Noel Pearson means he gets in the door and gets a lot of what he's asking for."

He pretty much insists on it, if Warren Pitt's memory serves him correctly. "I can't tell you what goes on in cabinet," says Pitt, "but a number of times issues have been raised where he

has demanded things…" Pitt remembers arguing against channelling funding for a particular Cape York project through one of Pearson's organisations, "but the cabinet at the time were frightened of Pearson, or Pearson's capacity to create negative publicity, and gave the money to him".

A former ministerial adviser agrees that the Queensland government has bent over backwards to keep Pearson happy. "I've seen incredible deals done to try to satisfy him," she says.

Pearson's central argument is that welfare dependency has completely demoralised Aboriginal society, resulting in widespread alcohol abuse, domestic violence and school absenteeism. Since 2008, the Queensland and federal governments have funded the trial of a Pearson-designed reform program that aims to get people into work and kids into classrooms, thereby restoring social order and a sense of purpose. The four Cape York communities in which the program is being tested – Hope Vale, Aurukun, Coen and Mossman Gorge – have a total adult population of about 2500. By the end of this year, the trial will have cost more than $100 million.

Results have been mixed. The Family Responsibilities Commission, which was set up to run the trial (and counts Pearson among its three board members), has the power to restrict parents' access to welfare payments if they repeatedly fail to send their children to school. Despite this threat, school attendance in all four communities in term one of this year was lower than in term one of 2011. In three of the communities, it was also lower than in term one of 2009. On the other hand, attendance in the fourth and largest community, Aurukun, has dramatically improved since the trial began – from 46 per cent to 71 per cent. (Federal Opposition leader Tony Abbott, a big fan of Pearson's, convinced some of Australia's highest-powered business executives – including Harvey Norman's Gerry Harvey and Wesfarmers' Richard Goyder – to join him in a working bee earlier this month to renovate the Aurukun school library.) Standards of reading and writing are said to be rising, and parents in the communities have voluntarily contributed more than $1 million to education trusts.

Disappointingly, labour market figures indicate that the unemployment rate in Aurukun and Hope Vale has risen, rather than fallen, during the trial. (Figures for Coen and Mossman Gorge are not available.) Pearson is said to have accepted in recent times that in some communities there will never be jobs for everyone. Still, according to Lew Griffiths, "attitudes are changing, with more people actively looking for work".

Warren Pitt welcomes any sign of progress on the Cape. "I admire indigenous people standing up for themselves and taking leadership," he says. But the former indigenous affairs minister worries about Pearson: "The more the world has bowed down to him, the more he's got his own way, the more he believes he can do anything at all."

Hope Vale was a Lutheran mission when Pearson was growing up. The only books in his family's small fibro house were religious tracts, which he read by the light of a kerosene lamp. He and his brothers had to share a bed. Yet his childhood seems to have been largely happy and secure. "He used to write about it," says Jane Greenwood, his final-year English teacher, "and it was very moving – the respect that he had for his dad, and the sheer, unadulterated love for his mum."

Pearson, along with other promising teenagers from Hope Vale, boarded at St Peter's Lutheran College in Brisbane. "A lot of the Cape kids felt very lonely and cut off from their families," says Greenwood, who worried that for Pearson, an outstanding student, home

would never again be quite the same. "I think he found it quite difficult going back during school holidays. He – perhaps more than any of the others – had this aura of academic approval about him, so he got the 'whitey' taunt."

Pearson went on to Sydney University, where he studied history and law. He had a stint in a Melbourne law firm and reportedly considered becoming a barrister. He would have been a good one – he is a mesmerising orator – but instead has devoted his life to championing the indigenous cause. In Up from the Mission, his acclaimed collection of essays and speeches, he tells of his dawning awareness as a child of the institutionalised racism that shaped the lives of his relatives and friends. The cruelty of it – "the contempt and paternalism of the whites and the deference and humiliation of adult people who happened to be black" – affected him deeply. "Disturbed my young soul," is the way he puts it.

Greenwood, who still sees him occasionally, suspects that at some level her former pupil remains angry. "And I can't say I blame him. I don't condone his bad behaviour, but it's very easy for us to criticise when we haven't been in that situation."

That Pearson has persuaded Australians to dig deep to try to improve the lot of indigenous citizens seems to Desley Boyle entirely admirable. "What an accomplishment for him to have prime ministers nervous of him and inclined to cater to him!" says the former state indigenous affairs minister. "What tremendous courage he has shown from an early age, not only to speak up in his part of the world but to go to the boardrooms of Sydney and Melbourne and speak up, to take on the national scene and the national media."

Tony Koch expected his friend to grow more consultative as he got older. "It pains me to say the opposite has happened," Koch wrote in his column. "Pearson's profile has blossomed but so has his ego … Instead of drawing people into his orbit, Pearson has succeeded in pushing almost everyone away." The Wilderness Society's Lyndon Schneiders agrees that Pearson has become more isolated and autocratic. "There's only one way and that's Noel's way," says Schneiders, who fell out with him over Queensland's Wild Rivers laws, which Pearson opposed on the grounds that restricting industry near pristine waterways would limit economic opportunities on Cape York. (In a major victory for Pearson, the state's new Liberal National Party government recently announced that it would scrap the legislation.)

The full amount of funding Pearson has received from various state and federal departments is difficult to calculate – and his spokesman, Lew Griffiths, declines to provide figures – but those who have worked in the Cairns offices of his organisations describe quasi-bureaucracies with large numbers of well-paid staff and exceptionally generous budgets. "The government pumps money into them," says Harry Tenni, a former employee of Cape York Partnerships. Another ex-staffer says it was the only place she has worked where money was not an issue: "I was just always surprised that there was so damned much."

It seems to Chris Graham, managing editor of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council's magazine, *Tracker*, that Pearson attracts funding "by telling white Australia what it wants to hear. White Australians love the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps approach to Aboriginal circumstance." The irony, as Graham sees it, is that Pearson's anti-welfare programs are themselves extremely expensive. On the evidence, it could be argued they do not deliver value for money. "But Pearson has been untouchable," says Graham.

Pearson often gives the impression that he is bored by what others have to say. "You'll sit with him in a meeting and he'll pay absolutely no attention," says strategic management

consultant Peter Bycroft. "He'll be playing with his phone." Last year, the Queensland government appointed Bycroft to prepare a plan for evaluating an education program that Pearson is piloting at three Cape schools. The program is based on Direct Instruction, a highly structured teaching system imported from the US. The trial is costing the Queensland and federal governments more than $10 million over three years.

Bycroft says he was surprised when an education department official told him that in order to win the evaluation-plan contract, his company would have to hire a particular consultant recommended by Pearson. His next surprise came when a senior executive of Pearson's Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy – the organisation whose work was to be assessed – said to him: "I don't want any findings that people will use against us." A draft document in which Bycroft expressed concern about the academy's defensive attitude and "cult-like adherence to the concepts of Direct Instruction" was leaked to Pearson, who phoned him in a fury. "I got this 30-minute tirade," Bycroft says.

Indigenous educator Chris Sarra thinks Pearson should accept that no one is above criticism. "If we receive public money to run various initiatives, then we should be prepared to be scrutinised in a way that's constructive and fair," says Sarra, head of the Stronger Smarter Institute at the Queensland University of Technology. Sarra wishes that people in power would realise that Pearson's is not the only authoritative Aboriginal voice in the country. It is exasperating, he says, to try to talk to politicians and bureaucrats about indigenous schooling, only to be met with blank looks and the response, "I agree with Noel."

Lew Griffiths maintains that the Cape York organisations are models of corporate governance. "The financial accountability up here is probably the best in the country," he says. Yet according to a woman formerly employed as one of Pearson's project managers, his senior executives often displayed lofty contempt for public servants from the government departments that provided their funding. "They would refuse to take their phone calls if they weren't high enough up the food chain for Noel to deal with," says the woman, who claims she was sent to meetings with express instructions to withhold information from bureaucrats: "They've got questions to ask about the progress of a project, how the money is being spent, and I will be told I'm not allowed to tell them anything." The bureaucrats wearily accepted it, she says. "There was a clear understanding that I'd been sent there with a gag on."

Pearson's organisations have attracted some of Australia's brightest professionals, including former Rhodes Scholars and scores of short-term secondees from corporations such as IBM and Westpac. But Boston Consulting's Colin Carter, a founder of the secondment program, says many of them end up frustrated: "They go committed to work on a cause and often find themselves dealing with dysfunctional working environments."

One of Pearson's former staffers says, "I'd read about Noel's philosophy on welfare reforms and it was something I believed in and wanted to be part of.

I was super-excited to jump on board." But disillusionment set in almost immediately. "On my first day, another employee pulled me aside and told me to run: 'Turn around, don't come back, you do not want to be part of this organisation.' It wasn't too long before I started to figure out why."

Like most of the ex-staffers I interview, this woman says her enthusiasm for the work never waned. It was the workplace that was the problem. "The whole organisation runs on Noel's whim," she says, adding that people were eager to do his bidding but rattled by his mercurial

temperament. "Most of us had been in the office on at least one occasion to hear him absolutely losing it at somebody."

Harry Tenni left Cape York Partnerships because he felt his hard work was doing little to improve the situation in indigenous communities. "You come with expectations that you're going to help," he says. "And it just never happened. You never saw that change." Another ex-employee says staff turnover was so high that, "when I had my going-away party, I was looking around thinking, 'I don't know who most of you are. But thanks for the card.'"

An inquiry into the Cape York Land Council in 2005 found lack of transparency in accounting practices and various other breaches of conditions attached to government funding. An ex-land council lawyer tells me that at a meeting of the Kalpowar native title group in 2009, he told two relatives of the Pearson brothers that he would have to check their claim to be members of the group; he then got a call from Gerhardt Pearson, who said: "You people are f…ing clowns. When are you going to get your f…ing facts straight?" The lawyer says he later got a message from Gerhardt telling him to get out of town.

Danny Gilbert, managing partner of law firm Gilbert & Tobin and a former Cape York Institute chairman, agrees there is room for improvement in the way the organisations are run. "But it would be wrong to conclude that the problems are such that the work that's being done up there should be abandoned, or that the government should withdraw its support," Gilbert says. Ann Sherry, another of Noel Pearson's corporate backers, has no doubt that he is driven by determination to improve the lives of his fellow indigenous Australians. That he can be demanding and difficult seems to her understandable. "Noel is impatient," says Sherry, chief executive of cruise line company Carnival Australia. "As he gets older, he's getting more impatient, I think, because he wants to see change happen more quickly."

When Lyndon Schneiders thinks about his one-time friend, it is with an odd mixture of respect and regret. Whatever else is said about Pearson, there is nothing timid or small about him. "His strengths are magnificent strengths," Schneiders says, "and his weaknesses are huge and profound."