

Pearson's grip on Indigenous policy is not backed by evidence

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Noel Pearson has long had the ear of government, including then minister Tony Abbott back in 2002. AAP/Alan Porritt

Noel Pearson is seen by many as Australia's most influential Indigenous leader. As well as being chairman of the Cape York Group, he is an outspoken commentator who shapes policy as part of the Abbott government's inner sanctum advising on Indigenous affairs. When Pearson talks people listen; in many cases his policy ideas have won bipartisan political support. There are many who have put their faith in him - of that there is little doubt.

But Pearson's personal style has long been divisive, attracting strong critics within our own Indigenous communities. Recently, concern over his approach spilled over into the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

On the policy front, the evidence is not clear. Many believe Noel Pearson's Cape York reform trail has established him as the father of a policy movement, which will end reliance on what he calls the "roots of the passive welfare predicament of Indigenous Australians". But the *Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation report*, published in 2012 by the former government department FaHCSIA, raises more questions than answers.

Rather than end reliance on government funding, the Cape York Welfare Reform Program has received more funding from federal and state government agencies than any other trial program per population base in the history of Aboriginal funding. A grant of A\$133 million for the initial four-year period was jointly funded by the federal and Queensland governments. Last year, the Queensland government proposed to cut off funding, then changed its mind.

What makes the funding figure alarming is this money has been provided to only four communities ranging in population from around 100 in Mossman Gorge to 338 in Coen, to 1071 in Hope Vale and around 1500 in Aurukun. In all, that's \$133 million over four years for 2961 people. No individual has been more critical of Indigenous funding than Pearson. Yet his own programs receive more money on a per capita basis than pretty much any other organisation in Australia.

Where is the evidence to justify funding?

The other concern of note to come from the report is that there appears to be very little qualitative evidence of any social change coming from the Cape York program.

It is continually stated throughout the report that reliability and completeness are problems that are not overcome within the data. Another contextual factor that must be taken into account is that the boundaries of the trial are not always clear. This makes it difficult to disaggregate the specific effects of welfare reform from other policies and programs in these four communities.

The evaluation report also notes a clear absence of benchmarking data, lists gaps within the research and observes that data are rarely available. Most importantly it questions data on the underlying level of child abuse and neglect.

Ascertaining the true level of child abuse and neglect is extremely challenging and these data are not available for Australia as a whole, let alone small, discrete communities. Data collection presents real problems in developing any sense of accountability or change within the communities served by Pearson's welfare reforms.



Hope Vale is one of four small communities affected by programs that secured \$133 million over four years for fewer than 3000 people. AAP/Dan Peled

Funding support of this magnitude without a requirement to provide rigorous, quantifiable research data to support the outcomes is a step backwards. It takes us back to the bad old days, a time many in my community refer to as the age of “the loving dictator”. It is a term that describes the development of lateral violence and

cliques that almost destroyed self-determination within our communities through a management culture that thrived under ATSIC.

Despite this questionable track record, a new teaching model backed by Pearson was recently awarded a further \$22 million.

Pearson also co-chairs (with Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet associate secretary Liza Carroll) an elite committee established to oversee the way Indigenous funding is spent. Is it not a concern that somebody who has so many programs funded by government is also the co-chair on the very committee that decides where this funding is to be spent?

A man used to getting his way

Recently, indigenous affairs minister Nigel Scullion confirmed in *The Australian* that he and Pearson had a heated argument at the Garma Festival in the Northern Territory.



Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion drew an angry response from Noel Pearson for questioning his funding accountability. AAP/Yothu Yindi Foundation

Scullion rejects the account published on New Matilda web-site, which alleged Pearson told him to “get the f*ck out of our campsite”. But there is little doubt that the exchange occurred over Scullion suggesting greater transparency and outcomes for the funding Pearson receives.

Pearson has a documented history of bullying behaviour. In 1999 he poured a cup of water on ABC journalist Sharon Malloy over a question he didn’t like in an interview.

With all the stories of Aboriginal men threatening women, this is a case where one of the most prominent Aboriginal men in the country abused a female journalist.

The great division Pearson causes within the Indigenous community has been known for some time. As Cape York traditional owner Murrandoo Yanner has said, Pearson:

... has always been a bully, because he's got sycophants around him ... talk to any of them for 10 minutes and they worship him; none of them thinks for themselves. That's why he can't stand in the same room as me. He can't do all the bully and bluster because he knows I'll throw him out the window.

As Murrandoo Yanner and Tiga Byles both testify, Pearson has never had the same acceptance in his own Aboriginal communities that he has in non-Indigenous communities.

Pearson's anti-welfare rhetoric is mean-spirited and far removed from any sense of Aboriginality I grew up with as a child. We were always told to look after the most disadvantaged. By attacking the poor and those on welfare, attention is taken off programs that have little or no basis in evidence.

It appears Pearson has established near monopoly control over Indigenous funding with no reliably measured outcomes. He is allowed to speak and do as he wishes while the rest of us are denied access to anywhere near the resources he commands.