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Noel Pearson is a great orator but he's essentially a leader without followers in Aboriginal world

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Noel Pearson's speech on Gough Whitlam was one for the ages.

Noel Pearson's eulogy for Gough Whitlam on Wednesday confirmed that Pearson is, by a considerable distance, the best orator in Australia. It was a speech of the head and the heart. It was a speech for slow reading aloud, because Pearson's oratory has pace, metre, cadence, and timing, and almost all of the rhetorical devices, including assonance, irony, metaphor and not a little pathos.

There are better, and sometimes more persuasive or effective speakers in Australia, but there are none better for the formal occasion, the prepared and carefully structured presentation, the calm advocacy, some look of the prophet, some forcing of carefully chosen words over an oral hill, and some sharp jabs into the senses.

Pearson makes every word pay full fare, and richly as he mines allusion and secondary meaning, his text is usually spare and the pace of delivery slow and deliberate, if carefully attuned to the point he is making. His power is not, anyway, so much in the individual words as such. Generally he used everyday, not fancy ones. It

is in the rhythm and sound and metronomic effect of the sentences he shapes with those words.

They bespeak a brilliant mind, eager to joust and engage, and a rich fund of learning, knowledge and experience in history and philosophy. They also show serious training in the arts of rhetoric – a subject, like grammar, hardly formally taught these days, except, sometimes to protestant preachers in the United States. Few Australian-trained preachers, and even fewer politicians and other used to public speaking have studied homiletics, and, usually, it shows.

So mesmerising can Noel Pearson be, and so practised and hard-worked his style, that some think immediately of a Martin Luther King, even perhaps of his "I have a dream speech." In fact, the similarities are not great, even if both have been outstanding in writing poems of prose, memorable sentences, and can pull on reason and the emotions. One wants to take the ride on offer. Their speeches are the more powerful because they address great topics, tell us what we should think, and reflect not only a natural leadership but an instinct for drawing lessons, for summary, and for exhortation.

There were other good speeches at the funeral, as so often at good funerals. Even better, if not as a polished piece of oratory, was that of Graham Freudenberg, who drafted many of Whitlam's greatest speeches, and who, after years of very close collaboration with him, could even think in Whitlam words, formulations and mannerisms. His, like John Faulkner's, were simple, emotional, if timeless appeals to a Labor heartland, a recollection of a certain grandeur and nobility, and a call to a continuing breadth of vision and hope.

Pearson, by contrast, is far from a true believer, for all that he paid tribute to the old man. His was for the ages, a speech that will be remembered, as speech, long after many have forgotten what he actually said.

But it is important to remember that Noel Pearson, and a number of other good speech givers, are deeply controversial figures in their own communities, and, for that matter, in the hundreds of other communities of Aboriginal Australia. By week's end, indeed, there was already pushback from some Aboriginals about any suggestion (which had not actually been made) that Pearson had been speaking on "behalf of" or as a representative of Aboriginal Australia, with Pearson, in any event, angrily denying that he had spoken for anyone but himself.

In significant respects that is Noel Pearson's problem. He is a brilliant thinker, a powerful and charismatic speaker, and well able to impress people, not least a lot of politicians and many people in corporate Australia, with the force of his intellect and the power of his ideas. He has a strong critique of welfarism in Aboriginal society (indeed, in broader Australian society as well) and is an apostle of a focus on personal responsibility which seems to have captivated significant elements in both the Labor Party and the Liberal Party.

Pearson, one of the founders of the Cape York Land Council and an array of institutions in northern Queensland, had very generous public and private funding to test his ideas about better education, about individual, families and communities

taking greater charge of and responsibility for their lives, and about intervention in problem families. Successive governments, may indeed, have poured more money into Cape York communities, in programs effectively controlled by Pearson and his brother Gerhardt, than have gone into Northern Territory Intervention communities.

Likewise, Pearson, along with Warren Mundine, chairman of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, and Professor Marcia Langton, another prophet of the need to move away from the dysfunction and failure of 40 years of Whitlamite policies, have had the ear of successive governments, as well as the business and mining community. Langton has worked closely with Andrew Forrest in promoting a new jobs plan, which would closely connect entitlement to welfare benefits, delivered through a government card, to proper management of family and affairs.

They are each effective speakers, who have earned considerable respect for their ideas and their advocacy, as well as for the example of their own lives. They have themselves become members of the Australian middle class, primarily from their own efforts, in their own lifetimes. Each has become involved, in different ways, in wider Australian politics and debate, even if, perhaps inevitably, they have to cope with the perception that their Aboriginality and own personal experience defines their every thought, idea and action.

Each has a problem, that is a problem for government as much as for themselves. Their primary constituencies are in white Australia.

In the Aboriginal body politic, they are essentially leaders without followers. They have been anointed by white folk, but not embraced by those for whose advancement they argue.

It is not for want of trying. They have generally failed to persuade either an emerging Aboriginal bureaucratic and professional middle class, or people on the ground in the settlements, towns and cities of Aboriginal Australia that they have correctly diagnosed the problem, let alone that the medicine they prescribe will cure the problem, whatever it is.

This does not mean that they lack power, even in Aboriginal communities. For one thing, they have the ear of powerful people, including people with money to dole out. Governments with hundreds of millions. They have pulpits and platforms, sometimes newspaper columns on demand, from which they can advocate their view of the world, and criticise those of different views. At various times, they have been in positions to reward their allies and to punish their critics.

The respect they have earned in non-Aboriginal Australia has not been earned by telling people what they want to hear. Perhaps, for some of the more self-provident, there is a comforting attraction in the idea that people will save themselves only by lifting themselves by their own bootstraps. But one cannot accuse Pearson, Mundine or Langton of pandering to the audience, of over-simplification, or of letting white Australia off the hook. Indeed it is of the essence of their ideas that non-Aboriginal Australians have to accept responsibilities too, just as it seems sometimes to be of the essence of the contradictions in what they say that their solutions are, if anything, more paternalistic, controlling and stripping of personal responsibility and initiative

as anything in the welfarist societies they criticise.

Deciding whose insights are better is not really the point.

The point is that there is an active and lively debate going on in Aboriginal Australia about the way ahead. We know, approximately, what the prime minister, Tony Abbott, thinks of that, if little about what he actually means to do. We know, more or less, that what Abbott thinks is, more or less, what Jenny Macklin, the previous minister, and Malcolm Brough, the minister before her, thought. We know, more or less, the sum of ideas, represented by Pearson, Mundine, Langton and Forrest. And we now have about seven years experience of state and federal policies designed to fit in with all of this thinking.

But there is very little evidence that there has been any sea change in thinking out in the relevant Aboriginal communities and households, or in the heads of a new generation of Aboriginal leaders. They are all, of course, well aware of the "new thinking," and equally well aware both of the practical problems in different communities, and the sorts of policies and programs that are making any sort of difference. No one knows better than those who must endure it that things, as they stand, are going nowhere; and that standing still may well be going backwards.

In a good many of the gatherings of Aboriginal Australians, the antipathy and open hostility to the new thinkers is enormous. It's often reciprocated too. From one point of view, the new thinkers have been duchessed, rewarded and, as often as not, have been the vehicle by which community organisations have been disbanded, consultation at community level turned into a complete joke, and the power of the bureaucrat over personal lives of a sort similar to that described so movingly in Queensland, under Joh Bjelke-Petersen before Gough Whitlam and the Racial Discrimination Act.

On the other hand, perhaps, those most strongly criticising the new order are seen as those who had been failing their communities, been blind to the neglect and abuse of women and children, and entrenched in expensive positions and organisations that were manifestly not making a difference.

Yet if there is anything to be said for the criticisms going in either direction, it is not at all clear that either sets of players are doing much to go over the heads of such leaders to appeal to the ordinary men and women in communities. If anything is going to happen, whether because of new ideas or magic, it must necessarily involve a change in the minds and attitudes of ordinary Aboriginal Australians, whether in the outer or inner suburbs of Sydney, the regional towns and cities, or in more remote locations and settlements.

No change can occur simply because Centrelink imposes some new system, or a minister announces that every child will go to school. One has to bring the people along.

Down the track, if there is not informed consent to what is occurring, the cost of administering programs to apathetic, insolent and unengaged recipient becomes prohibitive, even as the physical situation gets worse. At the moment, for example,

there is probably $8 spent in the bureaucracy, logistics, and organisation of services to Aboriginal Australians for every dollar doing into an Aboriginal hand. One cannot but think that if it were the other way around, things could hardly be worse.

If imposed regimes –welfarist or responsibility focused, integrationist or assimilationist, racist or non-discriminatory – could make a difference, one might think that there would be some evidence of it by now. Whether in Cape York communities – the centrepiece of Noel Pearson's sense of himself and of his mission – or in intervention communities in the Northern Territory, in country towns in Victoria or in Perth, and Darwin, and Brisbane and Melbourne. It's not just a matter of fine words.