

Australia: Aboriginal leader pushes anti-welfare agenda

Mike Head
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A definite political agenda has emerged in the wake of last month's publication by the Melbourne *Age* and its sister newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald* of rape allegations against Geoff Clark, the chairman of the Australian government's official indigenous organisation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).

Whatever the immediate purpose of the attack on Clark, it has provided a vehicle for renewed efforts to shift the politics surrounding Aboriginal affairs further to the right. While the accusations against Clark have yet to be proven, various media commentators and politicians have widened the allegations to other ATSIC leaders and asserted that their alleged crimes are part of a pandemic of sexual and domestic violence perpetrated by Aboriginal men in general, often under the influence of alcohol. Moreover, the argument goes, this social blight results from dependency on unemployment and other welfare payments.

One of the most striking developments has been the renewed promotion of the views of Aboriginal lawyer and land rights negotiator Noel Pearson. The same newspapers last week featured a column by academic Robert Manne extolling Pearson's opinions under the headline: "Charting a new course for black survival." Manne described Pearson as "one of the most imaginative and penetrating social thinkers in Australia" and "one of those rare intellectuals who has moved in his thinking beyond Left and Right".

Having just been escorted by Pearson through several Aboriginal communities at Cape York, in Australia's far north, Manne praised a new paper written by his host, which argues that "passive welfare dependency" among Aboriginal people has produced a "social epidemic" of drugs, alcohol and domestic violence.

"In this paper Pearson argues against the fashionable 'symptom theory' of substance abuse, namely that such abuse is a symptom of something deeper, like past trauma or present unemployment. While rooted in the particular susceptibility of traditional Aboriginal societies, for Pearson alcohol and drug dependency are now pathological conditions in their own right, with a terrible momentum and logic of their own... For him, unless the epidemic is controlled by a community determined and legally enforceable program of prohibition and rehabilitation, the future of the Gulf communities will be bleak."

Put simply, Pearson's "intellectual" breakthrough amounts to embracing the traditional right-wing and inherently racist conception that the social problems afflicting Aboriginal people

are not rooted in two centuries of massacres and dispossession, nor in continuing economic deprivation and joblessness, but in a unique susceptibility to drunkenness and drug addiction. Pearson's solutions echo the old colonial and religious nostrums that saw Aboriginal people removed from their lands and consigned to tightly-controlled church missions and government-run reserves.

Manne, who edited *Quadrant*, an anti-communist magazine of social comment and literary review, between 1989 and 1997, is regarded as an influential figure in academic and political circles. He is a regular columnist in the Fairfax press, author of several books on conservative politics and communism and editor of the recently launched *Australian Quarterly*. In recent years, he has sought to shed his Cold War anti-communist image, labelled himself a social democrat and become a critic of government policy.

Pearson's themes were amplified by another prominent media figure, Maxine McKew, in an interview for the *Bulletin*, the news magazine published by Australia's second biggest media magnate Kerry Packer. One of McKew's featured "lunch with" interviews, it was given front-page treatment under the headline: "Noel Pearson speaks out—Our Problem and How to Fix It."

According to McKew, Pearson is "tired of libertarian permissiveness" and sums up the root problem of Aboriginal people in three words: "It's the grog." His statements would not sound out of place in any corporate boardroom. "Salvation won't come on a plate...We have a lot to learn from the conservatives about social uplift and economic inclusion... Aboriginal people will accept that they need to take responsibility for their own self-determination."

Toward the end of the interview, McKew turns to Pearson's proposals and warns her readers: "Libertarians should stop reading now because Pearson's preferred methods bear a striking resemblance to the authoritarian and absolutist regime of the Lutheran missionaries who used to run places such as Hopevale [Pearson's home community]."

Pearson's solution is essentially a law and order call for the boosting of police repression against Aboriginal people. "He wants to ramp up the policing in the communities," McKew writes. "He wants a zero tolerance attitude towards the dealers in the streets of Cairns who are pushing both marijuana and heroin onto children. As for the communities, he's pushing them to trial prohibition."

Across Australia, Aborigines are already imprisoned at some 20 times the rate of non-Aboriginal people, and more than 200

Aboriginal prisoners have died in police and prison custody over the past two decades. Pearson's prescription would undoubtedly see that toll rise—without the slightest improvement of the social conditions confronting Aboriginal people.

His latest pronouncements take further the attack on the right to welfare that he first launched in 1999. His position is based on the crude assertion that Aboriginal people are to blame for their own social deprivation—including some of the worst health outcomes in the world, extremely poor levels of education, lack of access to basic facilities such as running water in some communities and unemployment and poverty rates several times the national averages.

Over the past 20 years, Aboriginal communities have also been used as testing grounds for universal “work-for-the-dole” schemes, now being imposed on the unemployed more generally. Starting in 1978, jobless Aboriginal workers were forced into the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), under which they were obliged to labour on local projects, supervised by well-to-do Aboriginal bureaucrats. While Aboriginal officials prospered and launched businesses, those who refused to work at their direction were stripped of social security benefits and often banished from the community. Such is the reality of “passive welfare dependency”.

The elevation of Pearson and other privileged leaders in recent years is bound up with a shift to the encouragement of a new layer of Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Under the banner of “self-determination,” black business people have emerged, preaching private enterprise as the answer to poverty. In reality, this grasping layer has profited at the expense of Aboriginal workers. The resulting class polarisation has been accelerated by the creation in the early 1990s of “native title” land rights, converting communal land relationships into a new form of private property, which has been used to form lucrative partnerships with mining and pastoral companies.

Sitting astride this growing social divide has been the federal government's ATSIC, disbursing funds of some \$1.2 billion a year, with a large proportion dedicated to financing the CDEP schemes. Established by the Labor government in the 1980s in order to cultivate an indigenous elite, ATSIC has become increasingly discredited as its programs have only worsened the impoverishment of most Aboriginal people.

ATSIC's corrupt record is now being exploited by government and media figures to call for the dismantling of the welfare and employment programs altogether—paving the way for the full unleashing of market forces in Aboriginal communities—combined with a toughened police regime to deal with the inevitable social catastrophes and unrest.

Three months ago, the Commonwealth Grants Commission handed a report to the Howard government advocating the bypassing of ATSIC in favour of local indigenous bodies that would administer funding in partnership with business operators. Pearson has spearheaded a similar approach on Cape York, using native title rights as a bargaining chip to gain funds and limited employment promises from giant mining companies. He has condemned welfare payments for discouraging Aboriginal participation in what he calls the “real economy”.

Alongside the promotion of Pearson, some media outlets have seized upon the Clark allegations to call for ATSIC to be shut down altogether, in line with the Grants Commission report. In a June 30 editorial, Rupert Murdoch's Brisbane *Courier-Mail* urged the government to dismantle ATSIC in the name of providing “improved, and particularly more relevant representation of indigenous interests”.

ATSIC represents a thin veneer of Aboriginal officials and business people who have benefitted from the official program of “land rights” and “indigenous representation”. But the hostility felt toward these bureaucrats among ordinary Aboriginal people is now being utilised to pursue a reactionary, pro-business agenda.

One noteworthy feature of this campaign has been an alliance between right-wing elements, such as Manne and former Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Herron, and left-liberal and feminist figures, such as *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Margo Kingston. In the name of protecting Aboriginal women and children from male violence, Kingston has urged ATSIC's disbandment, declaring: “Maybe it is time for Aboriginal leaders who cut their teeth winning equal rights for Aboriginal people decades ago to step down in favour of young Aboriginal leaders with fresh ideas and a fresh commitment to further the interests of their people.”

Kingston, who previously wrote articles discrediting Pauline Hanson's racist One Nation party, is now using her credentials as a “radical” journalist to advocate the elevation of a new breed of Aboriginal leader, typified by Pearson. Her role illustrates a wider political coalescence.

In his interview with McKew, Pearson spoke of the need to “transcend the ideological divide” between Right and Left and “encroach on the heartland of the right”. He referred to the “tremendous goodwill” among conservatives toward Aboriginal leaders like himself.

Over the past decade, the “left”—a catch-all phrase for Laborites and ex-radicals—has increasingly abandoned any conception that there are social and economic causes for the poverty and deprivation in which Aboriginal, as well as many other working people, are mired. Once they argued that the social conditions could be improved within the framework of capitalism, provided that its worst excesses were curbed and at least minimal welfare protection was provided from exploitation.

No longer. Having created a layer of Aboriginal officials and entrepreneurs in the name of “reconciliation” and “self-determination”, the so-called left are today moving in behind the likes of Pearson and joining the more ideological sections of the right-wing in reviving the traditional methods of the ruling class—complete with police repression on remote settlements.



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