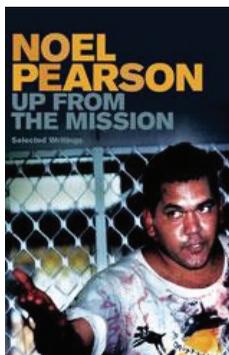


# Pearson's long consistency

Richard Allsop reviews  
*Up From The Mission:  
Selected Writings*

by Noel Pearson  
(Black Inc,  
2009, 416 pages)



**O**n a personal level, Noel Pearson loses me on page 336.

It is at this fairly late stage in this collection of his essays that he expresses a 'complete perplexity about the point of Australian Rules Football'. Pearson comments that he finds nothing in it but 'boredom', and thinks that, if soccer takes over as the national sport, 'Australian Rules should be folded up'.

But despite this highly questionable judgement (Pearson is a Rugby Union follower) his diatribe against Australian Football is not entirely gratuitous. He uses it to make a powerful point about what he calls 'layers of identity'. In this debate he shares Amartya Sen's rejection of the notion of people having a single identity based on their ethnic group. The fact that many indigenous Australians love, and indeed excel at playing in the AFL, does not make it part of Pearson's identity. Yet he does feel 'some remnant connection' to the town in Bavaria from which the Lutheran mission in which he grew up on Cape York was launched.

Labelling consecutive sections 'Fighting Old Enemies' and 'Challenging Old Friends' neatly captures how the issues Pearson has chosen to highlight have positioned him in the political debate. Unsurprisingly, most essays in the former section date from the 1990s; most in the latter from the 2000s.

In the 1990s, Pearson appeared to have many of the views of what most would regard as a typical Aboriginal

activist—rejoicing in the Mabo judgement, marvelling at Paul Keating's Redfern speech and attacking the incoming Howard Government in virulent language. This decade, we read what we now think of as typical Pearson—lamenting the abuse of children in Aboriginal communities, crusading against passive welfare, and attacking the incoming Rudd Government in virulent language.

Pearson makes very clear that he has not abandoned the rights agenda of the 1990s, but in recent times has felt that conditions of dysfunction and abuse have made the responsibility agenda far more urgent. He also makes the point that where some people see a contradiction between his support for both native title and mainstream economic participation, he sees creating a model of Aboriginal modernity as the means to their cultural survival, citing later 20th century Japan as an example of achieving modernity while maintaining cultural identity.

Linking rights and responsibilities, Pearson argues that 'the right to self-determination is ultimately the right to take responsibility'. His disgust with both the Right's opposition to the rights agenda and the Left's opposition to any suggestion that Aboriginal Australians should take responsibility for their own lives, has led him to develop his own political paradigm which he dubs 'The Quest for a Radical Centre'.

One of the key arguments that Pearson has in favour of the Mabo judgement is that it was the product of

the common law, an import which, incidentally, he rates with cricket and Earl Grey tea as England's best three contributions to Australia. He lauds the common law's 'capacity for logic and justice and balance and change', and is confused that many conservatives pushed for legislation to overturn a common law decision. He argues that this desire to remove property rights from Indigenous Australians 'would have horrified Friedrich von Hayek' as he claims it involved 'the very legislative discrimination and government appropriation of property that von Hayek stood firmly and clearly against'.

Pearson began running his now well-known arguments on responsibility because he felt there was a huge gap in the debate on Aboriginal policy, especially when it came to a topic such as malnutrition among Indigenous children. All the discussions were about Aboriginal rights and government responsibilities. However, no-one seemed to be querying why—when parents were receiving welfare payments and with ample food available in local stores—children were still not getting a decent feed.

Pearson is scathing of 'the prejudice, social habits and thinking habits of left-leaning, liberal-minded people that make them unable to deal with the real factors behind our disadvantage'. He also attacks 'the patronising double-standard' of those on the centre-left who have strong self-regard and ambition, but who feel such traits should not be encouraged in Aboriginal communities, or indeed in other disadvantaged social groups. Pearson continues 'to put it crassly: poor people need to become at least as greedy as those who are not poor'.

Those readers seeking to understand what has gone so wrong in Aboriginal communities are provided with a clear explanation of how Aboriginal culture has gone from self-sufficiency to passivity in a couple of generations. Kinship relationships have become dis-

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Noel Pearson after a speech to the Centre for Independent Studies in 2005

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torted to the extent that refusing to provide money to a cousin to buy alcohol is seen as denying one's Aboriginality, whereas ensuring that one's family eats properly is seen as trying to act like a European.

As early as 1987, in a paper written with Mervyn Gibson, Pearson argued that it was 'time to stop portraying the contemporary Hope Valley alcoholic as a passive victim of colonisation'. He thought Aboriginals themselves had lost sight of how much their previous generations had achieved in maintaining their dignity 'in the face of dispossession and colonisation'.

Pearson is a fan of Shelby Steele's analysis of United States race relations which argues that white guilt was a key factor in turning the positives of the civil rights movement into the negative victim politics of recent decades. In the Australian context, Pearson sees the 1967 Referendum, anti-discrimination legislation and land rights as 'seminal achievements', but feels that progress was derailed by the fact that 'the politics of 'victimhood' became the predominant methodology of black advocacy and the reigning paradigm of public-policy thinking'.

For Pearson race is not destiny. Racism should not become an excuse and 'black consciousness' should involve striving for success, not wallowing in 'the victimhood and false separatism

of post-60s black leadership'.

He cites a number of factors which contributed to new victim mentality, headed by the availability of passive welfare, but also including: the equal pay ruling leading to the almost complete departure of Indigenous Australians from the pastoral industry; the interference of legal aid lawyers undermining the authority of elders; and the impact of alcohol and drugs.

To accept what the causes of the current problems are is not necessarily to agree with the Pearson solutions. However, honest discussion about the causes of the problems is itself a massive step forward from the restricted assumptions of much of the discourse on Indigenous issues in recent decades.

Pearson makes some acute observations about the political process. He argues that both politicians and media tend to exaggerate differences in policy positions, whereas he has found that 'the distance between good and bad policies is most often very fine'. The example he provides is policing where there is a fine line between police harassment on one hand, and zero-tolerance policing on the other. The latter is opposed by the Left, despite the fact that 'it would be truly progressive to restore social order to disadvantaged neighbourhoods'.

Pearson also has a neat metaphor that gets around the traditional idea that idealism and realism hang out at

opposite ends of the politician's linear spectrum. Pearson prefers a pyramid metaphor with idealism and realism on the sides and 'the quality of leadership dependent on how closely the two sides are brought together'.

Even if one accepts Pearson's argument that his basic views are unchanged, when reading a collection spanning more than twenty years the reader does get an insight into how Pearson's ideas have developed over that period. Given his contribution to changing the nation's discourse, it is actually surprising that this is the first collection of Pearson's writings.

The only original piece in the book is the Introduction, which begins with a discussion Pearson had with John Howard about rating Australia's Prime Ministers. While their assessments are highly debatable, what their friendly chat illustrates is the outcome of Pearson moving from 'visceral antipathy' to 'abiding respect' for Howard. That sounds like reconciliation, and is a good practical example of the words with which Pearson ends the Introduction:

Freedom for our people will not come as a result of progressive governments giving us our rights back or enacting 'social justice'. We will be free when we take back our right to take responsibility.

**R**