

Noel Pearson: Working for a better life

Noel Pearson
Director, Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership

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Cape York Institute
For Policy & Leadership

J Block, Newton Street, TAFE Campus
PMB 1, Cairns. QLD 4870

Telephone: (07) 4046 0600
Facsimile: (07) 4046 0601

Email: info@cyi.org.au
Web: www.cyi.org.au

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Illustration: Dyson

In an interview in *The Age* last Saturday, ("Clash of Cultures", *Insight*, 30/7), Lowitja O'Donoghue said that the ideas and policies dominating indigenous affairs are patronising and counterproductive - and that I am a principal architect of those policies.

The most telling statement in the interview was O'Donoghue's reported comment on my suggestion that the most responsible members of an extended family (for example grandmothers) be given some control over the welfare benefits paid to dysfunctional parents: "(O'Donoghue) is equally opposed to other Pearson policies, like the removal of welfare payments from dysfunctional families who squander money on alcohol and gambling and don't send their children to school. People are starving now, she says. You don't put kids in another situation where their parents haven't got welfare payments."

Yes, some children are starving now. But the reason they starve is that their parents malnourish and neglect both themselves and their children

We know from experience that dysfunctional people are difficult to cooperate with and that many of them will use unconditional social and material support to facilitate their lifestyle. Some compulsion is necessary for the sake of the children.

O'Donoghue has rushed to the conclusion that I advocate a policy that would risk creating a situation where children starve because parents haven't got welfare payments. But I do not suggest policies in which the amounts intended for the welfare and development of a child are decreased. Nor would I advocate a policy that would risk leading to a decrease in the amounts actually spent on education and proper food and housing for any individual or household.

I believe that the reason for O'Donoghue's misapprehensions is that in left-liberal and progressive discourse the words "patronising" and "paternalistic" have become hot buttons that stifle thought. Once a policy as been branded patronising and paternalistic, debaters such as O'Donoghue feel no need to examine facts or try to understand the rationale and the intentions of the policy so branded. The words 'patronising' and 'paternalistic' have become hot buttons that stifle thought.

Most income management and similar assistance with financial services to Aboriginal people would happen voluntarily. With the support of the Government, we have shown in Cape York Peninsula that individuals and families with low incomes can save for investment in education, businesses and household commodities. But I argue that in some situations, not only in indigenous communities, there is a clear conflict between two rights: the rights of children and the rights of parents to have discretion over their income.

The right of individuals to spend their welfare benefits at their discretion is treated as absolute. I have suggested a limitation in some parents' rights to secure the rights of their children.

If the public agrees with me that we need to strike a better balance, we would need to be cautious. For historic reasons still in living memory, Aboriginal people hate paternalism and patronising attitudes. The question is: what amount of compulsion would be acceptable?

O'Donoghue's answer is extreme. Her position would rule out compulsory income management even for the most dysfunctional households, with drug-taking and drinking pregnant mothers and violent fathers.

It is illogical that society has the right to enforce the ultimate paternalistic policy - namely, to remove a child - when the situation has become so bad so that it might be too late to give the child a normal future. But society is powerless to stop at an early stage one

of the greatest threats to child and family welfare: namely, misuse of the family income.

Misuse of money might initially be due just to thoughtlessness and lack of purpose. But after some years of destructive spending, an indigenous couple may have damaged their health, their ability to become socially and economically integrated, and their children's life prospects.

I regret that O'Donoghue is so trapped in her cynical interpretation of the political situation - that the Government is implementing patronising policies designed by me. Because of this distorted perspective, she perceives conflicts between us where there may not be substance.

O'Donoghue objects to an attempt to lure children to school through the incentive of swimming in a pool, arguing it entrenches the helplessness and irresponsibility of the families and takes them further down the road to powerlessness. She also objects to breakfast programs in schools because she sees intervention such as this as absolving from

responsibility the parents who have been drinking and gambling all night and not getting their children to school. She says the approach should be one of individual case management by education departments, as it would be if the family was white. Education departments have truancy policies and they are just not implementing them, she says.

O'Donoghue said that when working as a nurse, she did for a short time do the rounds of the camps, picking up children and taking them to town to wash and feed them before school. However, she soon said to the families: "I'm not doing this any more; this is your job."

Contrary to what O'Donoghue believes, I agree with her that policies such as breakfast programs to which parents contribute no work or money are counterproductive. I have advised against such programs for the same reasons as O'Donoghue. I also agree that government agencies should enforce the laws about child welfare.

In relation to incentives and mutual obligation generally, I agree with O'Donoghue about the potential problems of many mutual obligation programs implemented so far. About the petrol-for-face-washing program, Pat Dodson and I wrote in *The Age* last year ("The dangers of mutual obligation", 15/12/04) that it does not make sense to reward parents for doing something for which they normally need not be rewarded.

So there is much common ground between O'Donoghue and me. There is one real difference: Pat Dodson and I did give qualified support in our article to the important principle of mutual obligation.

The difference in opinion about mutual obligation hardly constitutes an unbridgeable gulf between O'Donoghue and me.

I believe that it is the (understandable) indigenous sensitivity about paternalism and patronising attitudes that makes O'Donoghue attribute opinions to me that I do not hold, exaggerate differences between us, and dismiss without proper reflection reforms that might be necessary to enable us to reach families and children in great trouble.

Noel Pearson is the director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.

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