

National Reconciliation Planning Workshop

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**Address by Noel Pearson to the
National Reconciliation Planning Workshop
30 May 2005**

***Note: The slides which accompanied this address are
inserted after the accompanying commentary.***

Thank you very much Sandy – thank you very much Matilda for the welcome by the Indigenous people of Canberra and surroundings. My response to this morning's session is that I think we're at base camp and we've got a steep climb ahead of us but we indeed have real opportunity. I've been afforded the undeserved privilege of perhaps provoking thinking about the next session that Sandy has described, necessarily my thoughts represent my own jaundice about these issues and my own convictions about what might happen.

Let me start at the beginning that in the bigger picture, the largest picture of the challenge we have ahead of us, it seems to me that there are three possibilities for Indigenous peoples in this country as there are for peoples right throughout the globe, particularly concerning the tensions between nation states and the peoples within them. It seems to me when I try to count the possibilities that there are three.

Firstly decolonisation – will the world continue the process of fragmentation through independence movements and the recognition of the independence of peoples.

The second choice is denial – for nation states to ignore the status of peoples and insist on the unitary nation state.

The third choice is recognition and reconciliation. To recognise the status of peoples and to secure reconciliation within the unitary nation state on the foundations of freedom democracy and development.

My own view is that we're nearing the end of the decolonisation era. After the liberation of nation states following the fall of the communist union states the decolonisation process in world history is near to an end. East Timor and the imminent of state of Palestine will be among the last of the newly sovereign states.

Three possibilities for dealing with the tensions between nation states and peoples within them

1. **DECOLONISATION:** To continue the process of fragmentation through independence
2. **DENIAL:** To ignore the status of peoples and insist on the unitary nation state
3. **RECOGNITION/RECONCILIATION:** To recognise the status of peoples and to secure reconciliation within the unitary nation state on the foundations of freedom, democracy and development

After the liberation of nation states following the fall of the Communist union states, the decolonisation process in world history is near to an end. East Timor and the imminent State of Palestine will be among the last of the new sovereign states

Australia must move from denial to recognition and reconciliation. We have no other choice. We have to recognise the status of peoples and to secure reconciliation within the unitary nation state on the foundations of freedom, democracy and development.

Because there are thousands of peoples across the world and only 200 sovereign states. Few new states will be created. The challenge facing the world is not the recognition of peoples through the creation of new sovereign states but the working out of the tense relationships of peoples within nations.

Australia must move from denial to recognition/reconciliation

RECOGNITION/RECONCILIATION

To recognise the status of peoples and to secure reconciliation within the unitary nation state on the foundations of freedom, democracy and development

There are thousands of 'peoples' across the world and 200 sovereign states. Few new states will be created.

The challenge facing the world is not the recognition of peoples through the creation of new sovereign states, but the working out of the relationship between peoples within nations.

Let me offer some thoughts about what is distinct about the Indigenous peoples of Australia.

In thinking about policy and direction in the future and how we might secure reconciliation between our people and the wider community, I think we have to first recognise that Australia is a first world country with an all pervasive welfare state which has the capacity to completely displace our traditional Indigenous economy even where those economies still exist. We live in a country that can completely displace the need for Indigenous economies to continue. It hasn't done that yet but it has the capacity to completely displace traditional economies.

The distinction between Indigenous peoples living in a first world welfare state and those who do not such as our neighbours to the north of us in PNG is decisive and is not properly comprehended when people think about this question of the survival of Indigenous cultures in societies in a globalised world. It may not be properly comprehended by Indigenous leaders contemplating the prospects of their people being able to retain their cultures in a changing world.

The problem which Indigenous peoples living in a first world welfare state is this: there is no longer any necessity to maintain the traditional economy or lifestyle. The retention of traditional cultural forms then becomes a matter of choice rather than necessity.

Passive welfare and traditional culture in my view are not compatible. Passive welfare undermines and ultimately unravels traditional relationships and values and will erode and

finally destroy the traditional economy.

What is distinct about the position of Indigenous people in Australia

Australia is a First World country with an all pervasive Welfare State which has the capacity to completely displace the traditional Indigenous economy.

The distinction between Indigenous peoples living in a First World welfare state and those who do not - is decisive and is not properly comprehended when people think about “the survival of indigenous cultures and societies in a globalised world”. It may not be properly comprehended by Indigenous leaders contemplating the prospects of their people being able to retain their cultures in a changed and changing world

The problem which Indigenous peoples living in a First World welfare state is this: there is no longer any *necessity* to maintain the traditional economy or lifestyle. The retention of traditional cultural forms then becomes a matter of *choice* rather than *necessity*

Passive welfare and traditional culture are not compatible. Passive welfare undermines and ultimately unravels traditional relationships and values and will erode and finally destroy the traditional economy

There are three possible directions for Indigenous people within the Australian welfare state. Our first choice perhaps is to see if we can remain as we are. To attempt to retain our traditions and cultures whilst continuing to be dependent on passive welfare for our predominant livelihood. I would say that this is not a choice at all.

Our second possible choice is to go back. To maintain our cultural and linguistic diversity in the same way as peoples in PNG and elsewhere in the third world are able to. But this is hardly possible. Indigenous Australians are now engulfed by the Australian society and economy, and it is impossible to see how territories could be established where the welfare state no longer reached.

The third possibility is to go forward. To find solutions to a bi-cultural and bi- and multi-lingual future. Where there is no longer any connection between traditional culture and traditional economy the retention of culture is no longer a question of coincidental necessity but one of conscious choice.

There are three possible directions for Indigenous people within the Australian welfare state

1. **To remain where we are.** To attempt to retain our traditions and cultures whilst dependent upon passive welfare for our predominant livelihood. I would say this is not a choice at all
2. **To go back.** To maintain our cultural and linguistic diversity in the same way as peoples of PNG and elsewhere in the Third World are able to. But this is hardly possible. Indigenous Australians are now *engulfed* by the Australian society and economy, and it is impossible to see how territories could be established where the welfare state no longer reached
3. **To go forward.** To find solutions to a bi-cultural and bi- and multi-lingual future. Where there is no longer any connection between traditional culture and traditional economy - the retention of culture is no longer a question of *co-incident necessity* but one of *conscious choice*

Let me tell you what I think it means to be a first world Indigenous people rather than a fourth world Indigenous people.

Firstly we have to find the ability to retain our distinct cultures, traditions and identities whilst engaging in the wider world.

Secondly, we must ensure that the economic structure underpinning our society is "real" be it a traditional economy, a subsistence economy or a modern economy including the mobility of our people.

Thirdly we must understand that education is the key to enable to bicultural and multilingual facility and maintenance as well as to enable economic mobility. And fourthly we will need to deliberately and decisively shift our cultural knowledge from its oral foundations to written and digitised foundations. We will need fundamental traditionalists to be learned in our languages and cultures, to fight for cultural scholarship and maintenance that can withstand whatever social and economic changes we will confront.

What it means to be a First World Indigenous People, rather than a Fourth World Indigenous People

- 1. We must have the ability to retain distinct cultures, traditions and identity, whilst engaging in the wider world**
- 2. We must ensure that the economic structure underpinning our society is "real" (traditional, subsistence, modern, including mobility)**
- 3. We must understand that education is the key to enable bicultural and multilingual facility and maintenance - as well as to enable economic mobility**
- 4. We will need to deliberately and decisively shift our cultural knowledge from its oral foundations to written and digitised foundations. We will need fundamental traditionalists to be learned in our languages and cultures to fight for cultural scholarship and maintenance that can withstand whatever social and economic changes we will confront**

We will also have to get real about what is involved when we say we want the same life prospects for Indigenous children as non-Indigenous children.

There is a tension between the economic integration including geographic mobility that is involved in the concept of recognised first world Indigenous people and retaining a culture that is based on a strong inherited and ongoing connection to ancestral lands.

Is this a tension or a contradiction? In Cape York we're attempting to answer the question that though this is a tension it is not an insuperable contradiction. We talk about the concept of orbits – of our young people in the future through capability and through choice being mobile in pursuit of their sporting, artistic, educational and career talents and aspirations. People choosing the scale of the orbits on which they embark – temporarily, for longer periods and ultimately returning home. We're trying to conceive of a Cape York where young people go and pursue their goals in the wider world whilst always knowing they have a home base. And unlike the departures of the past, where too often our people left and never returned, we want to provide the means for them to make active contributions back in their home community where they are welcome. And this means that our home communities must not be parochial. Our home communities must value the young who gained connections, who gained experience and who gained so much that they could give back to their people if only they were welcome to do so.

We're also talking and having a conversation about the Cape York community as a people not just defined by our residents – there may be Wik people in Melbourne, there may be Guugu Yimithirr in Singapore and of course a great many of the tribes of Cape York will live in centres of economic growth such as Cairns. Though we are a mobile community we do not lose our character as a united people connected with the concept of a communal heart being our homeland.

There are some realities we have to face though. Firstly, it may be the lesson across the world that all attempts to create societies that are not integrated with metropolitan centres of economic growth and culture have perhaps failed. It is something we must bear in mind.

Secondly, another reality is that if we are to be a first world people we have to be engaged in the global world if we are to fulfil our desires.

And the third reality, and this is something that I particularly front foot with those who are concerned about our languages and cultures in the long term – I believe fervently that literacy and high education will be critical to the transmission of language and knowledge in the longer term. The social transmission of languages and knowledge in the long term will be insufficient – will be insufficient – it will only be a higher level of literacy and education that will sustain our languages and our diverse and rich languages right across the country in the long term. For that to happen we have to make the jump from orality to literacy. The Jews made this jump several thousand years ago and they renewed and recovered Hebrew in that process and Hebrew will remain a language alive in millennia to come. If we will have the same goal for our languages and our knowledge then we will have to move in much the same way towards literacy and higher education.

We will have to get real about what is involved when we say we want the same life prospects for Indigenous children as non-Indigenous children

There is a tension between the economic INTEGRATION (including geographic mobility) that is involved in the concept of a “Recognized First World Indigenous People” and retaining a culture that is based on strong inherited and ongoing connection to ancestral lands

Is this a tension or a contradiction?

- **Orbits**
- **Community as a people, not just residence**
- **Communal Hearth**

Some realities

- **All attempts to create societies that are not integrated with metropolitan centers of economic growth and culture have failed**
- **If we are to be a First World People we have to be engaged in the global world**
- **Literacy and High Education will be critical to transmission of language and knowledge in the longer term**

Let me now talk about some policy nostrums that I have been particularly talking about with my people in CY.

Let me say at the outset that not much of what was said this morning and what will be said over the course of the two days in terms of content is new. Most of the content we have talked about – we have talked about rights and responsibilities, we have talked about all of the major issues that will lie at the heart of our discussion over the next two days. Can I say that though we have all the contents included, the most critical thing we must understand is that it is the balance we put on that content – it is the emphasis we put that is most decisive and it is the strategic priority we accord to some of these concepts that is most critical. It is not that rights are more important than responsibilities or vice versa because we’ve always conceded that both of those elements are part of the mix. It is if we get into a situation where we under emphasise responsibilities and perhaps under emphasise the need for practical change. I think it’s a question of emphasis, I think it’s a question of balance and I think it’s a question of strategic priority.

Some policy concepts (i)--Our right to take responsibility

Some things need to be emphasised at an early stage in order for other elements of our policy to be realised. Let me illustrate that. If we want our languages and cultures to survive our people have got to get sober. So the strategic priority of confronting substance abuse is in fact absolutely critical to maintaining our right to cultural diversity. And that is I think a point I'd like to urge some consideration on that critical to the determination of the correct policies is our understanding of the emphasis which we give certain things. I was disturbed quite frankly by Senator Lyn Allison's comments this morning about overcoming disadvantage being important but a raft of other issues perhaps being just as important and so on. I think my understanding is that overcoming disadvantage is absolutely key to us realising our rights. If the rights of our children are going to be realised we have to turn to the business of overcoming disadvantage forthwith. Otherwise the rights of our children are just theories. The rights of our children can only be achieved in practice if they can sleep peacefully with a full stomach at night. And the concept that perhaps there are some political and legal guarantees and standards that need to be secured as a matter of priority is something that I believe cannot rest unanswered. I want standards of human rights to be reflected in reality and the business of reflecting those rights in reality requires people to turn their hands to the wheel so that people's material life is changed. The first policy concept we pushed in Cape York was "our right to take responsibility" and ultimately this is the right that will deliver the realisation of all our other rights. If we take charge of our own position and only we can ever truly take charge of our predicament. Only we can ever truly take charge of our own predicament and only we can take the measures necessary to realise all of our other rights.

And don't think that this business of us assuming responsibility is not a fundamental struggle for power – it will be a struggle for power – with bureaucracies, with government and with all of those who might think that our people are too miserable to take responsibility for themselves. There's a great bind here involving responsibility and a great struggle for power. If individuals, families and communities are going to take charge or their own future, then there has to be a displacement of responsibility by those who've filled the gap. Bureaucracy has got to retreat, in fact. Because on our passivity, other people have intervened and become active and they've established an industry around our passivity. And one of our strong goals I believe is to urge an understanding of that. That government service delivery and government intervention have in fact disempowered our people. Yes we need support, yes we need the resources of government, but when government sets up camp in our kitchen then I think we have surrendered the necessary building blocks of responsibility we need to underwrite social recovery. It's going to be a painful process for governments and all of the service industries that have been created around disadvantage – Indigenous disadvantage. They're going to have to radically rethink their role in intervening in Indigenous disadvantage. They're going to have to turn from saviours to enablers and supporters because only we can save ourselves.

Some policy concepts (ii)--Fight racism, but don't let it be our disability

The second thing is a very simple point. We've got to fight racism but we can't let it be our disability. It's a tragic thing I think that when people are victimised and so on and the terrible racism our people face that we make it our problem and we make it our disability.

Some policy concepts (iii)--Fight victimisation, but we won't be victims

The third concept is that we should fight victimisation. We can't nurture a sense of victimhood in our own people. It is the worst thing we can do, to inculcate in our people a sense of resignation to their victimisation. Does that mean that I deny there's victimisation? Of course not. Our people are victimised every day – in the streets, in the shops. The strife of life for black people is real. But the worst thing that we can do as Indigenous leaders and our supporters is to nurture this sense that just because you've been victimised you are officially a victim. Because we take away the one power that people could possibly have to defy victimisation and to resist falling victim.

Some policy concepts (iv)--Never forget history, but engage for the future

We should never forget history, but we shouldn't allow history to be our disability as well. In this I keenly take the lesson of the children of Israel. They have suffered notorious historical degradations as a people going back two millennia. And yet, they've had a very strong community consciousness that even as they will not allow people to forget the truths of the past, they will not inculcate a sense of victimhood and defeatism but instead they will engage with the future. I think that there's a lesson in that for us Indigenous people in this country. You know we shouldn't burden our young people – they should know about the past, they should defend the truths of the past but at the same time they should not be so burdened that they fail to engage in a future for themselves, for their families and their communities.

Some policy concepts (v)--Maintain our identity as a people, but encourage individual excellence and achievement

We should maintain our identity as a people but we should also encourage individual excellence and achievement. This is a real set of questions for us as a community. Our community should be one that encourages individual achievement and excellence and indeed we do when it comes to the sports, when it comes to the arts – I would like to see this encouragement of individual excellence and achievement to be more widespread across the full spectrum of aspirations and talents that our people might have. We've got to be a community, but we can't be dragging each other down. We've got to be a community that values the sense of relatedness and obligation whilst at the same time supporting individuals to take their place and to exploit their talents.

Some policy concepts (vi)--We don't have an inalienable right to dependency, we have an inalienable right to a fair place in the real Australian economy

I think we've got to refute the idea that we have an inalienable right to dependency. I've been going on about this for several years now. I say again that we don't have an inalienable right to dependency, how can we defend, how can we advocate our right to be dependent. We have a right to take a fair place of this our own country. We have to take a fair share of what is ours. We need a fair place in the real economy and when we inculcate a sense in our young people that somehow they've got a right to be dependent, we instil in them an absolutely incorrect understanding of what is their entitlement and what is their due. So I say that we have to start from the premise that our real entitlement if you're going talk about economics, our real entitlement is to take a fair place in our own country.

Some policy concepts (vii)--Rebuild a social, cultural, spiritual and legal intolerance of substance abuse

We've got to rebuild a social, cultural, spiritual and legal intolerance of substance abuse and again I've gone about this issue in recent years ad nauseam as well. We need a full court

press from the Indigenous leadership of this country around intolerance of substance abuse. We need an absolutely full court press because until our young people hear us being intolerant of substance abuse, I think they're going to continue to harbour the destructive mindset that somehow it's okay to drink, we're black, we're subject to victimisation and racism and exclusion, we should resign ourselves to this condition and anyway what more is there in the world for us. If we're the ones nurturing that outlook and that worldview in too many of our young people and people who are in terrible personal and family circumstances, I think we're failing our people in terms of leadership.

Some policy concepts (viii)--Maintain our unique identities and homelands but have the capacity to move between two worlds and enjoy the best of both

I think we have to maintain our unique identities and homelands but have the capacity to move between two worlds and enjoy the best of both. I know that this whole concept of orbits and mobility is probably a bit disturbing to many remote communities. The likelihood that people are thinking that Indigenous children of the future will lose their identity, I understand is a source of anxious concern. I think that we're still in the process of convincing our mob in Cape York Peninsula in relation to this, I think parental hesitation around education is sourced in this very question. Parental hesitation around encouraging their kids in education is sourced in the inability of parents and community leaders to see how it is that their young people when they engage in education are going to be able to retain their identity and their links with their home. I don't say that we've hammered out every aspect of this solution, but I say that the business of leaving people uneducated in the confined prospects of their home communities, remote from the centres of economic growth and remote from the centres of their desires is to resign young people to a really problematic future. I'd rather people have the capability to vote with capacity. If they choose to stay in Hope Vale then let that be a choice based on capability, mainly education rather than one made simply because there's no other choice.

Some policy concepts (ix)--Keep our diverse languages and cultural knowledge by excelling in western education and understanding that literacy and digital transmission of culture is the only means of arresting (and reversing) the decline of our ancient oral traditions

Finally if we're going to keep our diverse languages and cultural knowledge we'll have to do that by excelling in western education and understanding that literacy and digital transmission of culture are the only means of arresting and reversing the decline of our ancient oral traditions.

A final question I'd like to briefly dilate on at the end of this talk is how do we deal with this question of racism. And I've been recently thinking about the need for us to have a more complex understanding of race than simply goodies versus baddies. And I've been thinking about this whole question of how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people generally respond to racism against Indigenous Australians.

I've identified six general responses: three from Indigenous peoples to the racism they suffer and three from non-Indigenous Australians. Firstly, one of the main responses to racism amongst Indigenous peoples is to adopt a mentality of victimhood that is completely understandable. Yesterday coming down here at Cairns airport I was again reminded of absolutely how horrific racism is to the souls of people. I know all of the Indigenous people in this room – and perhaps leaders such as myself are a lot more immune on a daily basis to the cutting nature and the soul destroying nature of racism in daily life – so I was admittedly extremely taken aback by the incident at the airport. But let me say that the response of

victimhood for the reasons I gave earlier is a terrible response. We can't let racism turn us into victims but unfortunately it is too often is a response to racism by our people.

The second response is perhaps separatism. To defy the racism and encourage the view that we somehow need to separate from the rest of the country. I think that has been a very minimal if not non-existent response. We've had a bit of rhetoric around separatism and so on, but in truth, separatism is not a predominant response within our community. Alienation which is implied in separatism and victimhood is of course a real sense because it widely underpins victimhood and separatism. What I'd like Indigenous people to move towards in terms of their response to racism is to adopt a strong consciousness and a principled defence. The big challenge facing our community and our leadership is to shift our people from victimhood to a strong consciousness and a principled defence against racism.

Let me now talk about non-Indigenous Australians. A widespread response is denial. White Australians engage in a denial of our history or a denial of existence of and the effects of racism against Indigenous peoples or they minimise them. They say "just get over it". Denial is perhaps largely associated with the conservative and political right of our country but of course we all know that denial of the reality of racism is a significant non-Indigenous response.

The second response is one of moral vanity and this is significantly associated with the left. Racism against Indigenous people is used as a stick against those Neanderthals on the right and I know that I speak unfairly if I don't further explain that the denialists include amongst their ranks a strong defensiveness. They are engaging in denial because they are defensive of their heritage. They are defensive about their colonial inheritance. So many of the deniers are not absolute deniers. They just happen to be strongly sensitive in relation to the things they value – the English and British inheritance, the institutional inheritance of the country derived from Britain, all of the achievements of non-Indigenous Australians hearken back to. These are things that people are understandably defensive of.

And perhaps we do them injustice if we say they are all denialists when in fact there's a strong element of defensiveness that needs to be addressed by those concerned with reconciliation.

I'm also unfair to the moral vanity crowd because their original principle motivation was probably empathy for the plight of people being victimised. But the problem is that empathy transmogrifies moral vanity and it turns into a large cultural war between the denialists and the morally vain. They use race and history to beat each other up while we look on.

The position I'd like non-Indigenous Australians to take is not one of denial and not one of moral vanity but to take responsibility for racism. Take charge of the problem, not to morally beat up on one another, not to say we in the city are superior to you rednecks out in the bush, not to use it for those purposes but to use it to say "we have a problem in our midst here. We've got to take charge of it".

How do we deal with racism?

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS	NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS
What do Indigenous people do in response to racism?	What do non-Indigenous people do in response to their racism?
1. Victimhood	1. Denial
2. Separatism	2. Moral vanity
3. Strong consciousness and principled defence	3. Responsibility

Two last observations. It's a strange irony that it's people on the right, many of them denialists, who understand the problem of victimhood. They're the ones who urge us not to adopt a mentality of victimhood. They point out to us, quite rightly, that for our people to engage in victimhood is not good for us. But at the same time it's people from the left who unfortunately urge us in nurturing a sense of victimhood in our people. I think that is a terrible confrontation that progressive people need to make of their motivations in reconciliation.

A terrible confrontation must be made by people to understand that to the extent that they encourage victimhood in our people, they serve no good purpose.

You've got to take responsibility for racism and it's not just the rednecks in rural and regional Australia who need to come to terms with the problem. It's the whole country.

Let me conclude my comments there. Thank you.