

Noel Pearson on Wild Rivers and the Cape York Heads of Agreement (CYHOA), Musgrave, Cape York Peninsula, 3 June 2006.

It is ten years since I was last under this roof. I came here with the late Rick Farley whom I had the great sorrow of participating in the burial of a couple of weeks ago in Sydney. And Rick and my self were here to talk to the pastoralists from Cape York about the CYHOA early in 1996.

Can I say that I have been doing a lot of reflecting about how far we have come over the last 10 years and we who live in Cape York, whose future lies in Cape York, I must say are up against the ropes. The future of indigenous and non indigenous children who have come from the Cape York Peninsula is under threat.

I completely concur with my Chairman Michael Ross that the struggle against wild rivers is a struggle about the future viability of indigenous and non-indigenous communities in this region and as long as we have breath we have got to fight resolutely against this legislation.

But now I want to remind you and ask you to confront some of the political lessons that we should take when we look back on 10 years. What are those political lessons?

Well Rick Farley told me that the future of a place like Cape York requires the main factions to try and strike a balanced approach to the future. He said "Noel there is no other path than trying to make common ground with the pastoralists and the miners and those who are interested in economic development. And you also have got to contend with the fact that environmentalists have got strong support, if not within the region then outside of our region, for the protection of environmental values". And he said to me "you have got to make common cause across these 3 factions. You have got to strike a balance between the 3 factions", and that is what we attempted to do with the CYHOA.

Now let me briefly summarise the content of that Agreement. The Agreement contains a number of principles not all of which are easy. It is like a pyramid. Some of the principles are easy to agree with and then you go further up the pyramid and they get harder and by the time you get to the top of pyramid it is very hard to get everybody agreeing to those principles.

The bottom layer of this pyramid was agreement around things like land management, conservation management, land care and so on.

Well everybody puts their hands up to that; the pastoralists, the blackfellas, the Greenies, the State government and the Federal Government. So the \$40 million Natural Heritage Trust that was set up for Cape York has mostly been squandered on land care kind of wrangling and we have been put

through a whole lot of processes by both governments to get our hands on some of the money in pursuit of land care activities.

The next tier up that pyramid was principles about national parks creation, aboriginal land title recognition and cattle industry development. Those were the 3 principles further up the pyramid. National parks, Aboriginal land title and confirmation and support for the cattle industry in the Cape and economic development generally.

Now of course at the top of the pyramid the really hard issues were agreement amongst parties at the time for two things. The first was tenure upgrade and tenure security for pastoralists.

You forget that 10 years ago we had the blacks and the Greenies in support of perpetual leases for pastoralists.

Now, this is like Dracula in front of a cross, so far as the Greenies are concerned: tenure upgrade. But we had their agreement at the time that part of the balancing act was to ensure that the pastoralists in the Cape York Peninsula had absolute security of tenure and absolute security in relation to their industry.

The other side of the equation, at the top of the pyramid, was support for World Heritage assessment and listing of those parts of the Cape that justified that listing. Now that is Dracula to a cross for pastoralists and people concerned with development and it raises grave concerns for indigenous people as well.

So when we face a set of principles like that, some of them easy to agree with and some of them very bracing at the top end, what did we do?

Well there was a change of government immediately after we signed the Heads of Agreement in 1996, and I think that your constituency hoped that a friendly Federal Government would deliver those principles within the Heads of Agreement that you are interested in. But when we count the score 10 years later you have not got tenure upgrade. When we count the score 10 years later you have not got security for your industry, and that is because we did not do the hard political calculations about, well the Federal Government might be in support of us but do they control environment legislation and land legislation and water legislation? It is a Labor Government in Brisbane that controls those things that affect your industry.

John Howard and Warren Entsch might have been on your side but they could do precious little to stop vegetation clearing legislation and they could do precious little to stop the wild rivers legislation.

We find ourselves in a position where the Greens have walked away from the CYHOA. They no longer respect the fact that people need economic development and a cattle industry in this region, and they have been

winning. They have been winning against us hands down at the last two State elections.

They got tree clearing against you guys. They got tree clearing on DOGIT and Aboriginal land. We didn't even know that tree clearing was going to be prohibited on Aboriginal lands in the Cape. This was offered to Greenies in Brisbane with no consultation with us and now we have wild rivers, and I can tell you if we continue to pick and choose and go our own ways there will be more to come. Because politically the fact is blackfellas do not count in south-east and you guys do not count for the election of a Labor Government.

We have got to wise up to the fact that when it comes to Green preferences in the south east corner Cape York will be sold off.

The only way we can recover our position and to ensure that our futures are guaranteed is if we make common cause again. But you can't pick and choose. You can't just say I like the tenure upgrade bit but bugger the environmentalists.

There has got to be a balance and it is hard. There has to be a balance between 3 interests and at the moment there is a severe imbalance. We are up against the ropes and the Greenies are in the ascendant and they are in the ascendant because they are of more political value in the south east of the State than we are.

So I want to leave a message with you guys here today, that 10 years later we count the score and I have got to say that we should have been able to point back and say that the pastoralists of Cape York have had perpetual leases delivered to them and they also have a guarantee that a sustainable cattle industry is supported by everybody. But we look back on 10 years and we are far from those guarantees.

In fact we face the prospect that one day the Greens will get organised on World Heritage and they will steamroll the thing over the top of us. But we can't have our heads in the sand. We can't just say we want everything, they should have nothing.

So I want to leave this message here this afternoon that it is 10 years, and I was 31, the last time I was here. I'm almost as grey as Graham Elms 10 years later and if we are serious about underwriting a future for indigenous people, I mean you have all read and heard the recent controversies about the appalling state of indigenous communities. The way this policy will work out is that indigenous people will die on welfare. No prospect for development, no prospect of jobs, no prospect of even developing the lands that they already have. They will die in the ditch on welfare and that surely can not be supported by all reasonable Queenslanders.

So I want to leave a message to say to you, that on the wild rivers campaign I am absolutely beside our Chairman Michael Ross that we are resolute in

this campaign. You could fiddle with the Code and they could make a few concessions here and there and we you could even remove the guillotine of the legislation, but we will still die by a thousand cuts. Even if we remove the big axe from the legislation, this Code and so on will kill industrial development with a death of a 1000 cuts.

So we have got to have a full frontal attack on this legislation and we have got to try and connect with the people in Brisbane, with the people in the south east and with the people throughout regional Queensland, so that they hear what we are saying: that it is absolutely unfair that our rights and our children's rights should be ignored like this.

Thank you.

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