

Moved by Pearson's passion

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IT was the passion in Noel Pearson's voice that convinced John Howard his desire to activate the biggest social reform of his decade in power was right.

Speaking on the ABC's Radio National on Tuesday morning, the indigenous leader was painting a chilling picture of petrified Aboriginal children in remote communities cowering from the drunken sexual attacks of parents and friends.

Pearson -- who wants welfare cheques in his community on Queensland's Cape York quarantined for food and rent -- waved aside any concern about racial discrimination or paternalism. "Ask the terrified kid huddling in the corner when there is a binge drinking party going on down the hall if they want a bit of paternalism," he said.

To Howard, listening to the interview from The Lodge in Canberra, the starkness of Pearson's comments and their sheer undeniability was evidence that the community was ready for change.

Within 72 hours, the Prime Minister announced he was seizing indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, effectively stripping its government of control of half of its landmass.

Howard was grave and determined. His language was, in the tradition of Pearson himself, direct and uncompromising. "We are dealing with children of the tenderest age who have been exposed to the most terrible abuse ... what matters more: the constitutional niceties, or the care and protection of young children?" he asked.

The Pearson interview had presented in Howard's mind a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to draw a line under 40 years of an indigenous "rights agenda" and embrace direct intervention.

He was encouraged, no less, by his Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough, who had spent the past year passionately arguing for tough-love remedies to address the alarming rates of child sexual abuse in black communities.

"You might expect me to routinely pay tribute to the minister responsible, but it's more than that," he explained to the ABC's Lateline program on Thursday night.

"Mal, from the moment he took over this job, identified this as a problem. He talked about it to me. He talked about it publicly and you remember we did a number of things last year, put more money, had a special meeting of responsible ministers and

there's no doubt that Mal's urgings led to the establishment of the report that we've responded to. He has felt this very deeply."

The night before Pearson appeared on Fran Kelly's breakfast program to defend his own welfare policy proposed for his Cape York communities, cabinet had met in Canberra to discuss the commonwealth's response to the shocking disclosures in the Little Children are Sacred report released a week earlier in the Northern Territory, which outlined the extent of abuse of children.

According to one cabinet minister, Brough was boiling at the Territory Government's business-as-usual approach. He told the meeting that the Government had shown no leadership or ability to act and it was now up to the commonwealth to seize the moment.

After the cabinet meeting, Howard and Brough called for the secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Shergold, and the head of the Indigenous Affairs Department, Jeff Harmer.

It took little time for the foursome to conclude it was time to create a blueprint for intervention staggering in its scale -- a commonwealth takeover of half the Northern Territory. Howard insists his reasons for acting are genuine. But politically, the plan also held scant danger for the Government because Kevin Rudd would have had little choice but to support efforts to stamp out child sexual abuse even as they extinguished the Aboriginal self-determination held dearly by the Left of his party.

The four-man group agreed to establish a small team from PM&C and Indigenous Affairs to draw up a plan. The team was told: go for it. Do what you have to do to fix this.

The usual cumbersome departmental policy approach was dumped in search of a fast and radical plan. And within 72 hours of the Monday cabinet meeting the Government unveiled Australia's boldest Aboriginal policy in 40 years.

Brough was relieved. Only months earlier, the former army officer had turned to his wife and declared himself a failure. A year after reaching agreements with states to boost police numbers in indigenous communities, there had been little improvement.

"I have felt in the last couple of months enormous despondency and felt that I had failed," Brough told *The Weekend Australian*. "I said to my wife, 'I am the one bloke who is supposed to have the most influence and capacity in this country over these issues and with my best endeavours I am not making an impression. I'm just not getting anywhere'."

Brough says the most powerful argument for change came in a letter sent to him by a 21-year-old woman about the violence around her in the Alice Springs town camps. "She escaped from a community because she said she was afraid of being stabbed to death every night in the town camps," Brough says.

"She doesn't live there anymore -- she got out because she was having a baby and

she said that if she stayed there when her baby was born her baby would die.

``She said in her letter, `I have seen rape, I have seen suicide and I have seen petrol sniffing and I'm 21 and I shouldn't have to'. That ... has never left me," he says.

When the latest report on the NT crisis emerged last week, Brough knew it was his big chance. He was sure that the Territory Government's response to the report would be inadequate.

His office obtained the report online and he set to work to convince the Prime Minister that his radical ideas would work.

Howard immediately agreed that grog had to be outlawed and charged Brough with coming up with the bigger plan. Brough admits that a few years ago such a radical approach would not have been possible.

In the past, Howard, Shergold and Health Minister Tony Abbott had all been working on an intellectual framework for change. This time the power and the politics were right because Brough had worked on making child sexual abuse the key issue.

As Noel Pearson argues in today's *The Weekend Australian*: ``Child protection is not like poverty or educational under-achievement or general socio-economic disadvantage.

``Time and deliberation can be taken when considering and devising solutions to these large structural problems. But what do you do when a child is being subjected to abuse this very day?"

Brough had devised the imagery of the tsunami, which he used in Thursday's press conference, to demonstrate the need for an immediate, massive response.

On Wednesday, the team of bureaucrats came back with recommendations for action.

There were some modifications, but not many. And a special cabinet meeting was called on Wednesday for Thursday morning. At Wednesday night's Parliamentary Ball there was a buzz -- it was clear that something big was happening -- but the Government kept tight, revealing little detail on the scope of the changes to be considered by cabinet.

On Thursday morning the plan was endorsed in what Howard would later describe as the most passionate and committed cabinet meeting that he had ever chaired.

A special joint party meeting was called.

After that, and just before question time, Howard walked into the Blue Room, the same room where Pearson had held his own press conference only 72 hours earlier.

Brough was by his side.

At last, he says, he has the power to match his passion to fix the problems of Aboriginal Australia. ``Now I'll have the responsibility and the authority," he says. ``I won't have anybody else to blame if I fail."