

Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine effigies burned in Indigenous G20 rally

The Guardian
16 November 2014

Public figures branded 'elitist sellouts' in Brisbane protest that also targeted academic Marcia Langton



Indigenous rights protesters burn the Australian flag during a rally on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Brisbane on Sunday. Photograph: Jamie McKinnell/AAP

By Joshua Robertson

Aboriginal activists burned effigies of prominent Indigenous figures Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine on the final day of protests during the G20 summit in Brisbane.

Wayne Wharton, the Brisbane Aboriginal sovereign embassy (Base) leader, told a rally of about 100 people the pair were “elitist sellouts”, as a crowd circled burning figures labelled “King Noel Pearson” and “King Warren Mundine”.

Protesters also burned the Australian flag and an effigy of Indigenous academic Marcia Langton, labelled “Queen Marcia Langton”.

The protest again highlighted the hostility of grassroots activists towards Pearson, a

Cape York lawyer, and Mundine, a former national Australian Labor party president, and their perception by mainstream Australia.

Last week Base elders publicly interrupted a speech Pearson was giving at the Sir Paul Hasluck foundation dinner in Brisbane to attack his credibility as a spokesman for indigenous people.

Base has been the mainstay of the local protest movement during the G20 summit in Brisbane, leading the largest march of the event through the city on Saturday.

Those who challenged Pearson during his speech in Brisbane last week included long-time activist and perennial socialist political candidate Sam Watson.



Lawyer and academic Noel Pearson speaks at the Sydney Opera House in September. Photograph: Tracey Nearmy/AAP

Pearson accepted an invitation from Watson to meet Base elders and discuss his views on progress for the Indigenous community at Brisbane's Musgrave park, a traditional meeting place and destination for protest marches throughout the G20.

Watson – who criticised Pearson for his “lopsided” views on Indigenous affairs as the latter gave his speech – told Guardian Australia Pearson's profile was a source of frustration to many Indigenous people.

“We keep being told that there are these people here who are our leaders, you've got Pearson and others with the 10-gallon hats and everything, but you never see these people down at our community,” he said. “He's not our leader.”

Pearson, who has often sought to emphasise personal responsibility as the way forward for Indigenous Australia, was speaking on constitutional changes to

empower Indigenous people when he was interrupted last week.

In an exchange broadcast by ABC Radio National, Pearson told one interjector he had “never claimed to speak on behalf of anyone but myself”.

An elder who was not named replied: “You do every time you open your mouth. You speak [that] you are chosen to speak on behalf of black people. You have got no right to do that, stand there like a big strong black man. You’re not a strong black man, no way in the world.”

Watson said he had “a lot more to say but I didn’t think it was appropriate to canvass all the issues there”.

“I thought it was not an appropriate setting for a more complete and robust conversation about exactly what we see as Noel Pearson’s love affair with white Australia, in particular Tony Abbott and the Murdoch press,” he said.

“He still makes out that Aboriginal Australia are the masters of our own destiny and white Australia gets a free ride.”

Watson said his invitation to meet Base elders was genuine and that Pearson “readily accepted it in front of all his mob”.

“He’s on record now as saying he’d love to come up to Musgrave park and talk to us but no word [yet],” he said.

Another Base leader, Wayne Wharton, said Pearson was “always more comfortable where there’s no Aboriginal people or Aboriginal people that aren’t articulate”.

“That’s why Noel’s platforms are either in The Australian newspaper or taken up by Murdoch or Packer,” he said. “The only times he’s referred to as a leader is by non-Aboriginal groups.”

Pearson won national acclaim for his eulogy to Gough Whitlam at the late prime minister’s memorial service on 5 November in Sydney. Many commentators described the address as one of the country’s best political speeches.

Comment is being sought from Pearson..