

Noel Pearson's policies embraced by white Australia, but how effective are they?

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The message that Aboriginal people need to take responsibility for their future has been a popular one. AAP

AFTER THE INTERVENTION: ANU's Jon Altman investigates Noel Pearson's efforts to improve Indigenous welfare on Cape York.

In discussions about the NT intervention, Noel Pearson's work in Cape York is often held up as a model of how to approach Indigenous welfare. The Welfare Reform Trial has set out to restructure the norms of Aboriginal people on Cape York, moving them from welfare dependence to taking part in the economy. While it builds on some of the reforms from the intervention, the trial has enacted more widespread changes.

The trial winds up at the end of 2011, and there are now discussions about extending it to 1 January 2013. But is it doing what it set out to? Is it really benefitting local indigenous communities? The answer depends on whose opinion is most important, and whether the views of those communities are being heard.

The Cape York Welfare Reform Trial (CYWRT) is the brainchild of Noel Pearson, Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership (CYI). Pearson is undoubtedly the most influential person in Indigenous policy making in Australia today.

The trial is a tripartite agreement between the Australian and Queensland governments and the Cape York Institute. It's being implemented in four communities in Cape York: Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge. It covers a total adult population of about 1,600.

While the trial formally began on July 1 2008, it is the culmination of a prolonged campaign by Pearson that began in 2000 with the publication *Our Right to Take Responsibility*. It gathered force in 2007 with the completion of the CYI report *From Hand Out to Hand Up*. And it culminated in the passage of federal and state laws in 2008 which established the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) to empower communities to implement, and regularly report on, CYWRT.

How does the trial compare to the intervention?

Pearson has made his goal clear: he wants to fundamentally restructure the social norms of Aboriginal people on Cape York. But why?

For Pearson, personal and community responsibility have collapsed. This is because of long-term dependence on passive welfare ("welfare poison", he calls it) and deeply entrenched destructive behaviour that tolerates excessive alcohol abuse, domestic violence and school absenteeism.

The trial is a carefully calibrated and innovative social policy instrument. It aims to restore positive social norms and re-establish local Indigenous authority; move communities and individuals from welfare dependence to productive engagement in the "real" economy; and move individuals and families from social housing to home ownership.

Because CYWRT was developed alongside the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention, its contentious income management provisions were enabled by the Welfare Payments Reform Act in 2007.

But unlike in the Northern Territory, income management coverage in the Cape is not blanket. It is highly discretionary depending on the recommendation of local commissioners in trial communities.

Second, CYWRT clearly extends well beyond welfare reform as generally understood. It now encompasses education reform and a political campaign to gain stronger property rights for Aboriginal land owners, so they can enhance their economic development prospects. This broader ambit has been spearheaded by Noel Pearson and the Cape York Institute.

Third, CYWRT meshes closely with the over-arching COAG policy, Closing the Gap, also launched in 2008. Under the National Partnership Agreement for Remote Service Delivery, the four trial communities are targeted as "priority communities" and are monitored not just by the FRC but also the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services.

Is the trial doing what it set out to?

Elaborate and expensive machinery has been put in place to assess the effectiveness of CYWRT. But because there is a great deal at stake, any fact-based evaluation will prove difficult and politically fraught. This has already become apparent in discussions about extending the trial to 1 January 2013, with additional Commonwealth funding of \$16 million.

In supporting this extension and additional funding Minister Macklin's explanatory memorandum notes "To date, the Trial has made a real and lasting difference in the lives of Indigenous people in the Cape. Since it began in July 2008, the Cape York Welfare Reform communities have seen improved school attendance, care and protection of children and community safety".

KPMG tentatively supports this view. Their review found some progress in restoring Indigenous authority, indications of increased school attendance in half the communities and positive moves on alcohol abuse and violence.

However, the detailed ten quarterly reports compiled by FRC staff and other material in the KPMG review are more ambiguous about success. They found marked variability between the four trial communities.

The Parliamentary Library reports, for example, that individual behavioural change has been "fragile" rather than lasting. School attendance actually fell between 2009 and 2010 in three of the four trial communities.

To 31 December 2010, 78% of individuals in the trial have had over 6,000 "notifications": for school absence without reasonable excuse, being the subject of a child safety report, convictions in the Magistrate's Court or breaching tenancy agreements.

The FRC says that because "clients" refuse to participate in its processes, a relatively large number of them are now under Conditional Income Management, their welfare income managed by Centrelink for periods of three to 12 months. There may be community resistance to the authority of the FRC.

Arguably, while some objectives of the trial can be measured by performance indicators, others like standards of behavior or uptake of social responsibility will be extremely difficult to address.

Also while measures of effectiveness undertaken by the FRC are one thing, and even these such as local commissioners reporting increased respect for their authority from community members might be highly subjective, surely the views of the trial's subjects should be paramount?

And in any case, one would logically expect that such a radical project of moral restructuring aiming to repair long-term social decay will require generational, rather than quarterly, monitoring.

Do the means justify the ends?

If what I regard as a paternalistic regime is deemed necessary in the dire circumstances of trial communities, will the ultimate sanction of income management prove a sufficiently powerful instrument to alter social norms?

A critical issue that has arisen in relation to CYWRT is whether the means justify the ends?

Initially there was some community resistance to the trial but one hears of little overt opposition now. Perhaps it's because most national attention is on the 73 prescribed communities in the NT where there is little community control of reform. There are also plans underway for Northern Territory Intervention Mark II.

The income management provisions introduced as part of CYWRT were unprecedented in Australian social security law in 2007. Conditional welfare and income management have been more widely applied since then, although Indigenous Australians are still predominantly targeted.

Ultimately it is a moral question whether the means, including race-based laws, justify the desired ends: what cannot be questioned is the undeniable need for improvement in the dire circumstances of Cape York communities that have been graphically portrayed by influential public intellectuals like Peter Sutton and Marcia Langton, as well as Noel Pearson.

Why white Australia loves Pearson's plan

Non-Indigenous Australians have responded positively to the Pearson welfare reform agenda for a variety of reasons.

First, Pearson's outspoken diagnosis that Aboriginal individuals need to take responsibility for their behaviour and future resonates with many who not only like hearing this stated by a highly articulate Aboriginal man, but who would like to say the same but feel constrained by their ethnicity.

Second, Pearson's focus on individual agency assuages white guilt that it is the colonisation process and decades of neglect that have played a critical part in Aboriginal marginalization and socio-economic disadvantage.

Third, Pearson's approach appeals to many because they genuinely believe that things are so bad that direct disciplinary action is urgently needed.

By and large, white Australia has bought the now dominant narrative that self-determination has been a failure and that it is high time that Aboriginal individuals take responsibility. This is a message promulgated by Noel Pearson and echoed in the nationally-dominant Murdoch media (where Pearson has a regular column). It is repeated in bipartisan national political consensus and by the nation's most powerful corporate leaders.

There is widespread national bewilderment that Aboriginal people in remote Australia remain so socio-economically disadvantaged while Australia is more affluent than ever before.

All this does not mean that CYWRT is either right or wrong, just that it is currently very appealing to have an Aboriginal policy reformer take responsibility for fixing what appears to most Australians to be an intractable problem.

Who decides if FRC is a success?

Ultimately, the success or failure of CYWRT will need to be assessed by participating communities. It is interesting that Pearson is keen to devolve responsibility for CYWRT to communities: in the Preamble to the FRC Annual Report 2009–2010 he states perhaps with some historical revision that “it [the FRC] has been designed by Aboriginal Australians of Cape York and is driven by community members”.

And yet, Pearson sits as one of three members of the Board of the FRC alongside Queensland and Australian government members.

Evidence will also be required externally that the significant investment of public funds in CYWRT is reaping transformative results. One of the most difficult areas will be a shift from welfare dependence to engagement in the “real” economy.

An important policy question is when will we know that “the trial” is over and that the FRC is no longer needed?

Drawing on the metaphor touted by Mal Brough on 21 June 2007 in relation to “dysfunctional” prescribed communities in the Northern Territory, when will we know that trial communities have been “stabilised” and “normalised” and that it is time to exit?

What evidence will be required that social norms are sufficiently modified and that people are integrated enough into the real economy for dependence on the FRC to cease? These are difficult questions, the answers to which might emerge with time.