



PREAMBLE - NOEL PEARSON



Indigenous people remain locked in the most basic struggle for control of their own lives, peoples, places and futures.

“Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.”

Cape York communities provide prime examples of this crisis, so aptly described in the ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’.

The Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) provides a leading example of a structural reform at the local level in five communities. The FRC allows local people to exercise real authority and power, so that we lead the changes needed in our own communities. This is too rare in the heavily bureaucratised world of ‘Indigenous affairs’.

Since its inception in 2008, the FRC and its Local Commissioners have done very good work. The 2013 independent evaluation showed the direct positive impact FRC conferencing was having on helping people to fulfil their most basic responsibilities. Yet despite the FRC’s proven success, there has been no traction within government to build on this work.

There is a lot more the FRC could be doing to help our people. We have a long way to go with things like child protection, domestic violence and making sure that our people are getting the help they need from service providers and programs. We must think about the future and work together, with local people in the leading role, to evolve and develop this successful model.

Coen and Mossman Gorge have made hard won gains, but they do not want to simply return to the dismal landscape of ‘business as usual’ in Indigenous affairs. What is now required is to evolve the model based on the lessons learnt. It would be a backward step to simply take away something that has helped Indigenous people to lead positive changes for these communities.

It is Indigenous people, not government, who are best placed to hold their own people to account and help them to fulfil their basic responsibilities to family and community. Likewise, it is local people who should be afforded the role of senior partner in working out the next steps in the life of the FRC for their own communities.

Indigenous people want, and need, more innovation and structural reform — not less. We want, and need, more power and responsibility placed in our hands — not less. Local Indigenous people must be empowered to lead, and government must play a supporting role. Our futures depend on it.

I commend our Local Commissioners and our Commissioners for the crucial work they do for our people.

Noel Pearson