



PREAMBLE - NOEL PEARSON



Enabling and empowering local reform leaders to drive change lies at the heart of all that I stand for. It is one of my greatest privileges to have worked alongside so many leaders from Cape York over the years to help them achieve this most fundamental goal. Beginning as the centrepiece of the Cape York Welfare Reform trial in 2008, the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) has breathed life into the idea of restoring local authority over the past eight years.

Despite its successes, in some ways the fate of our most disadvantaged families hinges upon our ability to reclaim, indeed to reimagine, the Welfare Reform agenda of which the FRC has played an integral part. Our Welfare Reform agenda has never been narrowly defined and has always been about more than attaching conditions to people's income support.

This fundamental truth and the role of the FRC in the Cape York approach to Welfare Reform are still often overlooked and misunderstood. For example, many people would be surprised that only a small fraction of people in welfare reform communities have ever been placed on an income management order. In contrast to the Northern Territory Intervention, Welfare Reform in Cape York is not a blunt instrument.

The reforms provide a singular example of a Welfare Reform approach expansively, rather than narrowly, defined. The fundamental obligations that form the threshold for FRC conferencing are uncontroversial—ensuring adequate care of children, children regularly attending school, paying the household rent, and abiding by the law. When a person is conferenced by the FRC, income management is but one outcome. It is used where it is necessary to oblige someone to meet their basic household financial responsibilities like putting food on the table and paying the bills. Most importantly the FRC also can act as a key referral and case management point, and the FRC Commissioners encourage people to seek support and build their capabilities in terms of employment, education, money management, parenting, or social and emotional wellbeing. To this extent the FRC's effectiveness is dependent on the effectiveness of the capability building system. While gains have been made, in Indigenous communities there remains an enormous implementation challenge to build capabilities as needed.

The FRC and its Local Commissioners have demonstrated the value of empowered Indigenous leaders at the frontline of the reform effort. Battles have been fought and won to ensure that Local Commissioners have real power to confront those members of their own communities that fail to uphold what is a universally agreed threshold of responsibility. The FRC Commissioners continue to wield their power with far greater nuance, understanding and impact than interventions from outsiders can ever hope to achieve. We have made real progress. Now is not the time to abandon our expansive Welfare Reform approach. Rather, we must take careful heed of the lessons learnt from the many people that have been involved in 'giving it a go', and we must double down to face the ongoing implementation challenges before us.

The FRC was not intended to become a permanent fixture and the time has come for Coen to put plans in place to move beyond the FRC. In Coen, school attendance now sometimes reaches higher than the Queensland State average, and young people routinely expect to go away to boarding school at the end of their primary schooling. Coen should be rewarded for its achievements, and there must now be investment to support economic opportunities in Coen to create local employment opportunities.

I look forward to continuing to work with the FRC and each of its Commissioners as we embark on the next phase of this important reform journey.

Noel Pearson