



PREAMBLE - NOEL PEARSON

“The Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) has been at the frontline of the ambitious Cape York Welfare Reform (CYWR) trial for five years. I cannot overstate the importance of the role played by the FRC and its Local Commissioners to the trial’s success.

For those not familiar with small and remote Indigenous towns, it might be difficult to picture the role played by Local Commissioners. It should be remembered that the people that they deal with are not strangers. The people referred to the FRC are almost always well known to its Local Commissioners. They are people the Local Commissioners will see later in the street, in the shop, at the school, and at the clinic.

Local Commissioners have hard conversations with the people that come before the FRC. They challenge them about their behaviour. They encourage and support people to take up opportunities to make fundamental changes in their lives — changes that mean children are getting to school each day, and changes that mean individuals and families are managing their money so that food can be put on the table. Sometimes the Local Commissioners make the hard decision that maximum pressure must be brought to bear on an individual to encourage change — and a Conditional Income Management order is made.

Standing up for change is not easy, especially at the outset of the trial. Those addicted to grog and gambling, those threatened by change and those unable to see that life could be better often directed their hostility, resentment and anger at Local Commissioners.

But the FRC has succeeded where many previous efforts have failed. The legitimacy and authority of the Local Commissioners is now widely acknowledged by community members, by governments and evaluators. The release of the independent evaluation of the CYWR trial on 28 March 2013 is an important milestone. It confirms the central importance of the role of the FRC Local Commissioners and conferencing in bringing about fundamental transformations in people’s lives. Most tellingly, it contains the voices of community members who, although resistant at the outset, acknowledge the FRC was the catalyst for them making positive changes.

The FRC continues to rebuild local Indigenous authority and social norms from the ground up. I am immensely proud of what the Local Commissioners have achieved — with the unfailing support of Commissioner Glasgow and his team. The success of the FRC stands as testament that change can occur when local leaders are properly empowered to ask those around them to step up and take responsibility for their own lives, and the lives of their children.”

Noel Pearson

