

Preamble Noel Pearson



Self-determination for Indigenous people means having some control and autonomy over welfare conditions. In remote Australia especially, welfare payments have a big effect on our communities and our people. This will continue until job opportunities are available at scale for people to escape mass unemployment. There are simply too few job opportunities in remote communities, and we live in a country in which government prefers to pay people to be unemployed rather than provide job opportunities to meet demand.

The cycle of welfare dependency, poverty, and extreme disadvantage is well known. It is crucial our Elders have control over the application of welfare conditions. We cannot afford to have welfare conditions controlled by external agencies such as Centrelink and the bureaucracy in Canberra. That model has failed us. If Indigenous children are to have a chance to succeed like other Australian children born into greater advantage, our own people need to step in and take control themselves.

We have higher expectations of our people, our kin, and our children than remaining at the bottom of Australian society. Taking control of welfare conditions, empowers our Elders to help ensure people are meeting their basic responsibilities to community and kin—so parents are getting their kids to school, and providing homes and communities that are safe, for example.

In 2008 the Queensland and the Australian Governments changed the law, so our Elders and communities could take control of welfare conditions through the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC). This has been one of the most important acts of self-determination the country has ever seen. The FRC has now had 16 years of success—of Elders and FRC communities themselves taking power back from government and saying themselves what they expect of their community members and of each other.

The model provides hope for our children's futures. The FRC and its communities can be so proud of lives it has been instrumental in transforming. One of the earliest FRC clients has now had five children graduate from some of the best boarding schools in the State. She says this success for her children would not have happened without the intervention and support of the FRC.

This is how we Close the Gap. There has been a lot of talk from governments about the need for 'shared decision-making' under Closing the Gap but the FRC makes this talk real by giving Indigenous communities and Elders power and control over a key issue. This is what shared decision-making looks like.

I commend the important work of the FRC. I commend the FRC model to all seeking to take back control and who want to exercise our Indigenous right to self-determination.

Noel Pearson