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At the turn of the century, all was not well in Indigenous affairs. In the three decades since former prime minister Gough Whitlam proclaimed self-determination as the new policy era, little progress in health, education and employment had been made. The expanding corpus of Indigenous statistics highlighted that disadvantage was worsening on many counts. At the same time, an increasing number of reports of violence, particularly against women and children, began appearing. Concurrently, the Howard government, in power since 1996, had begun experimenting with mainstream welfare reform under the rubric of ‘mutual obligation’. These policies were epitomised by the introduction of ‘work for the dole’ schemes, which were marked for expansion on the recommendations of a major government report.

Noel Pearson’s *Our Right to Take Responsibility* delivered a bold message into this policy milieu: in the effort to restore Indigenous peoples’ rights, decades of government policy had eroded the capacity of Indigenous people to take responsibility for their own lives. While many argued that Indigenous problems were due to inadequate government commitment, Pearson made the opposite
argument, claiming that government services must be cut back in order to promote personal responsibility. His 2000 book foreshadowed a shift in Indigenous affairs that ultimately led to the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Intervention.\(^3\)

Noel Pearson was born in Cooktown in 1965 to Aboriginal parents of the Bagaarrmugu clan. He was raised in the Lutheran mission community of Hope Vale on the Cape York Peninsula. After boarding at a Lutheran high school in Brisbane, he studied law and history at the University of Sydney and became a regional Aboriginal leader. He founded and directed the Cape York Land Council in 1990, and played a key role in negotiating the *Native Title Act* in 1993. In 2004 he founded the Cape York Institute, which has received substantial support from the Queensland and federal governments for its welfare-reform programs.\(^4\)

Pearson has been a highly controversial figure, particularly since the release of *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, and his views on welfare and development have regularly appeared in the national media ever since. He describes the change in his public persona from being a 'pin-up boy of progressive Australia' in his years of land-rights activism to the last decade where his shift to a responsibility agenda has seen him become the 'antichrist' in the eyes of the progressive left who once adored him.\(^5\) His Aboriginality, along with his experience as a regional and national Aboriginal leader, lend great legitimacy to his arguments. As well as partly explaining his success in the public sphere, it is this very legitimacy that makes him a deeply problematic figure for non-Aboriginal progressive thinkers who disagree with his ideas.

This chapter will interrogate how Pearson deploys responsibility in his arguments. Through this analysis, I attempt to explain why his ideas are loved and detested by different ends of the political spectrum. While others have drawn attention to incomplete or illogical aspects of Pearson's argument\(^6\), my main concern here is to understand the internal logic in operation rather than to focus on inconsistencies. I show how his ideas resemble arguments for 1990s welfare reforms and 'new communitarian' political philosophies, particularly in constructing rights and responsibilities as opposed, rather than complementary, concepts.
Drawing on philosophical scholarship on responsibility, I argue that Pearson’s rhetorical success rests on his ability to separate ‘blame’ (causal responsibility) from ‘responsibility’ (primarily prospective responsibility for taking action) in Indigenous affairs. This discursive feat throws up a challenge to progressive Australians who wish to avoid blaming Indigenous Australians for their own disadvantage. In what follows, I integrate my analysis of Pearson’s arguments with my own ethnographic research on progressive Australians who work in Indigenous affairs. I show how the strong and divergent responses to Pearson’s ideas, both attraction and repulsion, can be explained by the conceptual proximity of responsibility and blame, and the moral problem this presents to progressive Australians.

**Responsibility in Political Theory**

There are many ways that political theorists and philosophers have conceptualised responsibility. The two most common dichotomies in these various treatments are causal and moral, and retrospective and prospective. Retrospective responsibility and blame are closely related concepts that concern events that have happened in the past. People may be ‘held’ responsible for events in a moral and/or causal sense depending on a variety of contextual and mitigating factors, such as whether the person in question was in control at the time of the event, and whether they were aware that their actions were wrong.

The second aspect, prospective responsibility, is similar to the concept of duty. This mode of responsibility is often associated with particular roles, such as parent or bus driver. One ‘accepts responsibility’ or ‘takes responsibility’ for their assigned roles. Note that prospective responsibility is related to retrospective responsibility in that if one takes responsibility for something, they are liable to be blamed—held responsible—for what happens (or what fails to happen) in relation to the responsibilities in question.

A third meaning of responsibility relates to whether a being can be a responsible agent or not, independent of a particular incident or prospective duty they may be responsible for. Some kinds of persons (such as young children and the mentally ill) and all non-humans are
not deemed capable of assuming responsibility for their behaviour. Related to this is the sense of responsibility as a 'virtue' or 'morally valuable character trait': individuals or collectives (such as governments and companies) can 'be' responsible or irresponsible in general terms, rather than in relation to a specific incident or duty. As we will see, Noel Pearson's *Our Right to Take Responsibility* draws on a range of these meanings.

**What Does Pearson Mean by Responsibility?**

The book's argument centres on the effects of 'welfare poison' on remote Indigenous communities. It argues that the provision of unconditional or 'passive' welfare promotes a sense of entitlement among welfare recipients and acts to undermine their sense of personal responsibility for supporting themselves and their families. In Pearson's revisionist historical narrative, the source of the current social problems in Aboriginal communities is not primarily colonisation, racism and trauma but the introduction of welfare in the early 1970s at the same time as the demand for pastoral labour diminished.

Individual responsibility, for Pearson, is a key factor in the success of all forms of social life. He argues that both 'traditional' Aboriginal society and the successful aspects of dominant Australian society depend on individual responsibility. The narrative that threads through the book is one of the loss of Indigenous responsibility through misguided benevolence from the Australian populace. The concept of 'traditional responsibility' does not receive much elaboration but refers to both traditional obligations to kin and the individual initiative demanded by subsistence living. In a traditional society, one had obligations to care for and share with kin (the first sense of responsibility). There was also a personal necessity for self-care and engagement in productive activities, because, as Pearson puts it, 'if you didn't work, you starved.' Pearson links these two aspects of responsibility through the concept of reciprocity. Though again this term is underexplored in this polemic text, it stands for both traditional obligations to kin and the broad aim of the welfare state, where one is supported through childhood and old age in return for taxation during one's productive years. In Pearson's account, this second aspect of responsibility—self-care and
productive labour—was maintained throughout the history of colonisation until the 1970s. As Aboriginal people were exposed to a range of economic models—from the traditional to the mission to the margins of the mainstream economy—the necessity for individual responsibility was upheld because ‘if you didn't work, you starved/ didn't get paid’. Throughout these periods the first aspect of responsibility—traditional obligations to kin—was similarly preserved.

For Pearson, however, the advent of the ‘gammon’ (artificial) economy of welfare presented a fatal challenge to ‘traditional responsibility’. Government payments removed the link between work and pay. Pearson sees this as an ‘irrational’ economic relationship that provoked similarly ‘irrational’ behaviour. Recipients of passive welfare develop the expectation that assistance will be provided from external parties without expending any effort, will devalue the resources and money that are provided and will lose any initiative to make changes independently of external parties; in sum, they will become dependent on the government. As a result, individual responsibility is corroded.

According to Pearson, this erosion of the necessity for productive work among the able-bodied is the key to the social problems that exist in the Cape York Peninsula and by extrapolation in remote Aboriginal communities more generally. Combined with the new availability of alcohol in the early 1970s, this erosion of individual responsibility led directly to the ‘corruption’ of the first sense of traditional responsibility—obligations to kin. Kinship obligations that once supported the extended kin network are distorted such that drinkers support each other to drink, and demand that (largely female) non-drinkers financially support them and their addiction, while the responsibilities of drinkers towards non-drinkers are ignored.

Pearson argues that the corrupted norms of Aboriginal society have become entrenched over the last thirty years. ‘Passive welfare is now well embedded in Aboriginal society. It is almost seen as the Aboriginal way, part of the culture.’ He sees non-Aboriginal society and Aboriginal society as locked in a reinforcing narrative that blames racism, trauma and dispossession for Aboriginal disadvantage. While he takes care to state his acknowledgment of these problems, he argues that focusing on them creates a ‘victimhood mentality’ that
contributes to ongoing disadvantage.

'Unconditional' or 'passive' welfare was the wrong solution, he argues because the problem was misunderstood: it is not 'the absence of rights' that is the cause of social ills but 'the absence of responsibility'.

Rights and Responsibilities

Pearson's account shares much in common with arguments for welfare reform in many developed nations that were at their zenith in the 1990s. Such arguments consider that the self-perpetuating 'culture of poverty' is reinforced by welfare and can only be mitigated through 'work enforcement' programs. These ideas led to international policy shifts typified by Tony Blair's 'New Deal' in the United Kingdom and Bill Clinton's welfare reforms in the United States. Both of these shifts were in turn influenced by the 'new communitarian' school of political philosophy championed by the entrepreneurial sociologist Amitai Etzioni.

One rhetorical strategy Pearson borrows from such accounts of welfare reform is the opposition of rights and responsibilities. Within the disciplines of political science and political philosophy, rights are usually associated with responsibilities in a dyadic relationship: the rights of one party imply that another party has responsibilities to respect or fulfil such rights. Rights have certainly been the focus for the political theory of Indigenous people and minority groups more generally, and are discussed alongside the duties and responsibilities of nation-states or international bodies to protect Indigenous rights.

Other accounts consider the responsibilities that are inherent to being a rights-holder. In these accounts, rights and responsibilities do not form a dyadic relationship between two parties but inhere to a single person or a collective. Having or claiming rights is associated with corresponding responsibilities. The new communitarian movement, for example, sought to strike a balance between the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and would call for whichever was judged to be lacking in a particular society.

In Pearson's usage, however, rights and duties refer neither to the responsibilities of government to uphold Indigenous rights nor
to complementary aspects of a person that must be kept in balance. Rather, the two concepts are in competition: granting rights curtails the ability of the grantee to exercise their responsibilities. In opposing rights to responsibilities, Pearson is echoing political philosophers who have argued that the discourse of rights in welfare states ignores individual duties and responsibilities, thus 'condon[ing] acceptance of the benefits of living in a democratic social welfare state, without accepting the corresponding personal and civic obligations'.

Rights and responsibilities form a stark dichotomy in Pearson's account. As a result of the corruption of traditional responsibilities by passive welfare and the reinforcement of a victim mentality from the left, Aboriginal people 'are deliberately taking and not giving, expecting rights and not being responsible'. Pearson sees the rights/ responsibilities dichotomy as a political one: the Labor Party and the left have historically been right about rights (land rights and native title), but wrong about responsibilities; the conservative parties have had the opposite problem. He presents himself as seeking the best elements of both political approaches.

Rights are associated with passive reception of help; with a 'victimhood mentality' that will cause people to resist taking responsibility, with the easy option, entailing 'just sitting back'; with a negative outlook about what is missing; with making excuses for bad choices; and with temporary external solutions. In contrast, responsibilities are associated with action; with initiative; with taking the difficult path; with a positive outlook; with facing up to one's contributions to bad outcomes; and with 'future-thinking' that reflects responsibility to future generations. Using the analogy of someone who cannot swim, a responsibility approach will involve the hard work of learning how to swim, or you will sink, while a rights approach will demand outside help and be provided with a government-sponsored 'cheap flotation device'.

Pearson's virtual demonisation of rights diverges from the communitarian approach for a 'quest for balance' between rights and responsibilities. It seems designed to repel progressive Australians who support Indigenous rights as the bedrock of Indigenous social justice. This strategy is further illuminated when we consider his approach to the relationship between blame and responsibility.
Responsibility and Blame

Pearson's conceptual innovation, and a key factor in his rhetorical success, is his attempt to parse out responsibility (prospective responsibility for enacting change) and blame (causal and retrospective responsibility). Aboriginal people are not primarily to blame for their disadvantage, he argues, but they still shoulder some responsibility for the state of their lives: 'This is not a matter of blame. People are caught in an economic and social system which precipitated this misery. But it is a matter of responsibility'.

According to responsibility theorists, this division between blame and responsibility is plausible. Aboriginal people could be seen as morally responsible agents with a prospective duty to take action to improve their communities, while being absolved of any causal responsibility for retrospective events. This sharp partition would appeal to progressive Australians who, as I explain below, are loath to apportion any blame to those they consider victims of colonisation and oppression.

However, Pearson does not pursue this argument. He maintains that some Aboriginal retrospective responsibility for social problems is necessary for invoking Aboriginal prospective responsibility in solving them. To make room for Aboriginal responsibility while moderating its relationship to blame, he distinguishes between 'proximate' and 'ultimate' causes for disadvantage. While he agrees that European colonisation is the root cause of Aboriginal problems, he argued in 1987 that his 'generation at Hope Vale cannot honestly point to colonisation and dispossession as the immediate cause of our social problems'. Dispossession is cited as the 'ultimate cause of our passive welfare economy' and as having 'indirectly caused the epidemic of grog and drug abuse'. Yet he argues strongly against ending the discussion with these 'ultimate' but 'indirect' causes. Rather than seeing someone with alcohol addiction as 'passive victim[s] of colonisation...we must consider how he has actively created his own problems'.

His assignation of retrospective, causal responsibility for the 'proximate' determinants of disadvantage (particularly alcohol and drug abuse) to Indigenous people or communities inevitably leads to a degree of blaming them for their plight. Further, assigning prospective responsibility for taking action to Aboriginal people leaves them...
open to claims of retrospective responsibility and blame in the future, if they fail to ‘take responsibility’ despite the carrots and sticks of welfare reform. While Pearson does try to separate blame and responsibility in his argument, both the residual blame for ‘proximal’ causes and potential for future blame are unacceptable for many progressive Australians who consider ‘victim-blaming’ to be a perpetuation of colonial violence. Whether or not this is a necessary risk to take in order to engender positive change is the broader ethical question raised by Pearson, and one I return to below.

**Pearson’s Critique of the ‘Liberal Left’**

As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Pearson’s arguments were delivered into a policy environment hungry for new solutions to Aboriginal disadvantage and for policy reform. The government was not the only audience Pearson had in mind. The broad church of progressive Australians who support Aboriginal rights and reconciliation are also the recipients of sharp critique in his 2000 book and other writings. He sees the lack of recognition of Aboriginal responsibility as an act of both omission and commission on the part of progressive, left-wing Australians, black and white. The denial of Aboriginal responsibility prevents social progress, but in addition, an undue focus on ultimate, indirect causes (racism, trauma and dispossession) prolongs and exacerbates social problems. It is not just that Aboriginal people have failed to take responsibility but that the ‘right’ to take responsibility has been denied to them by the norms of a group he calls the ‘liberal left’.

This group is identified most clearly in a 2007 essay where Pearson outlines six positions that white and Indigenous people take in relation to Indigenous affairs. The one associated with progressive, left-leaning people he provocatively calls the ‘moral vanity’ position. Pearson accuses those in the liberal left of worrying more about maintaining their moral superiority than about the wellbeing of Indigenous people. He argues that the most damaging aspect of their world view is the idea that Indigenous people cannot be held responsible in any way for their social circumstances. All current social problems are ascribed to racism, dispossession and trauma. To point to behaviour as a cause of social problems would be to ‘blame-the-victim’. Yet, this well-meaning effort not to blame Indigenous
people ends up 'victimising' them: 'They infantalise Indigenous people by not allowing those whom they seek to protect to face the consequences of their actions: Indigenous people's status as victims means they require protection from the real world'.

This critique of the 'liberal left' can also be understood in terms of responsibility and blame. Pearson's separation of blame from responsibility causes great unease for those who fall into this category. Although social psychologists have long argued for making careful distinctions between causality, responsibility and blameworthiness, for many left-wing Australians these concepts are too close to each other for comfort. White progressives detest the tendency among many white Australians to blame Indigenous people for their plight and seek to avoid being identified with this racist view. Their strong aversion to victim-blaming spills over into a distaste for any attribution of responsibility to Indigenous people in connection with disadvantage. While Pearson clearly understands this view, acknowledging that taking up issues of responsibility may 'reinforce negative stereotypes of our people', he believes this risk is outweighed by the 'serious and ongoing threat' of passive welfare and its negative social effects. He argues that in throwing the responsibility out with the blame, progressive discourses have done more harm than good.

Pearson's identity as an Aboriginal Australian (and particularly one with brown skin who speaks his traditional language), alongside his other many attributes (lawyer, community leader, gifted public speaker), has given his arguments immense legitimacy and moral force. This effect is intensified by his claims that responsibility, as he defines it, is congruent with 'true' Aboriginal culture, a culture that has been corrupted by the misguided benevolence of unconditional welfare. He raises the stakes for progressive Australians who seek to support Aboriginal culture but are disinclined to support any measures that could be described as paternalistic or heavy-handed.

Pearson has effectively divided the left in Australia. Some support him, some reject him and many more do not know what to think. These powerful responses to Pearson's ideas become explicable when we consider the challenges of separating responsibility from blame, and the moral difficulty this poses for those Australians concerned about Indigenous disadvantage. For some, Pearson provides a way out of this representational bind. Pearson promises
that the risk of blame is worth taking given the grave consequences of ignoring responsibility. Pearson refuses to be interpellated as conservative, arguing that considered support for rights and the promotion of personal responsibility can go hand in hand. Others argue that there is no distinction between assigning personal responsibility and victim-blaming, or, if there is, the risk of the former becoming or promoting the latter is too great.

**Is Pearson Right? The Efficacy of Responsibility**

The passionate nature of debate in Indigenous affairs is testament to the importance of Indigenous welfare to Australian governments. Both conservative and progressive Australian governments have adopted Noel Pearson's ideas because they offer the promise of improving Indigenous disadvantage along with an explanation for why the last four decades of policy have reaped few rewards. In *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, Pearson is unequivocal in his belief that making welfare conditional will liberate Aboriginal people's nascent capacity for responsibility from its decades-long immobilisation. Once 'released from the thralls of the passive welfare mode and mentality', then 'community members can and will come up with ideas on what needs to be done, and how they can be achieved'.

Twelve years on from the publication of his treatise, we should be in a position to judge whether promoting responsibility does yield the social return Pearson has promised. As mentioned above, his responsibility-centred policy ideas have attracted significant attention from governments. Since 2008, the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, which Pearson founded and directs, has received substantial funding from the Queensland and federal governments to run a trial of the Family Responsibilities Commission in four Cape York communities. The commissions are made up of local elders and a retired judge who offer voluntary or involuntary 'help', including income management, to Aboriginal residents of those communities who have come to the attention of the commission because of child safety, school attendance, unlawful behaviour or 'irresponsible' tenancy. Some of Pearson's policy ideas, such as suspending welfare payments to parents if their children were not attending school, were also adopted for the Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007.
One would hope that these real-world experiments with promoting responsibility—or enforcing responsibility, depending on how you see it—would provide a definitive answer in this debate, proving either that responsibility was the magic bullet missing from the progressive policy toolbox, or that its demeaning and disempowering properties can only make things worse.

Unfortunately, these experiments have not yielded a clear answer. The evaluations of both Noel Pearson's Family Responsibilities Commission and the Northern Territory Emergency Response have presented a mixed picture. Proponents of each side of the argument have used the data to argue that the promotion of responsibility has been a success and an unmitigated disaster.47

Accordingly, it is equally unclear whether Pearson or his opponents will turn out to be right about the liberating or damning effects of recognising Aboriginal responsibility. Time will tell whether the aversion of progressive Australians to assigning responsibility to Indigenous victims is misguided and damaging, as Pearson argues, or an ethical and rational response to overwhelming colonial domination.48

Notes
1 See Sutton, 'The Politics of Suffering', pp. 142–4; Memmott et al.
2 McClure.
3 The Northern Territory Emergency Response, otherwise known as the 'NT Intervention', was a swathe of policy measures enacted from July 2007 in the name of 'normalising' remote communities in the Northern Territory where extreme 'social dysfunction' had led to high rates of violence and abuse, particularly against women and children. The most prominent measure was the involuntary quarantining of 50% of all welfare income for those living in prescribed communities into an account that could only be spent on essential items using a special debit card. Alcohol and pornography were also banned.
4 The reform that has received the most attention is the Family Responsibility Commission, a community body made up of two local elders and a retired judge. Residents of the four designated Cape York communities come to the attention of the commission if they fail to ensure their children's school attendance and safety from harm and neglect, fail to abide by tenancy agreements, or commit drug, alcohol or family-violence offences. The commission can recommend a range of measures including quarantining welfare funds or redirecting them to another person who is responsible for the care of children (called 'income management'). See http://www.cyi.org.au/welfarereform.aspx.
Devine.

See, for instance, Martin; Hunter; Altman and Hinkson; Rowse.

Kowal, 'The Politics of the Gap'.

See Hart; Fischer, Moral Responsibility; Zimmerman.

Williams, 'Responsibility'.

In central and northern Australia in the twentieth century, Aboriginal people formed a large part of the remote workforce on pastoral stations, from stockmen to domestic servants. This work was paid in rations and very basic housing, sometimes supplemented with very low wages, but also allowed Aboriginal people to stay on or near their traditional lands. This ended abruptly with the implementation of the 1966 equal wages legislation.

Pearson, Our Right, p. 20.


Martin, p. 9.


Ibid., p. 22. Similar arguments about welfare and individual responsibility have raged over the last two decades internationally; see for example Schmidtz and Goodin.

Pearson, Our Right, pp. 19 and 25.

Ibid., p.30.

Ibid., p. 93.

For example Mead.

Note that this discourse has parallels in debates over the utility of providing foreign aid to developing countries and the problem of the 'dependency syndrome'.

Dwyer, Welfare Rights and Responsibilities.

Etzioni, The Third Way.

Singer.

See Ivison et al; Havemann, Kymlicka, Chesterman and Galligan.

Etzioni, The Third Way.

Glendon, p. 14; see also Etzioni, 'Too Many Rights'. It should be noted that Pearson does endorse rights in some contexts such as land rights (see, for example, Pearson, 'White Guilt'). My focus in this chapter is on those rights that he singles out for criticism.

Pearson, Our Right, p. 31.

Pearson, 'On the Human Right to Misery'.

Pearson, Our Right, p. 58.

Ibid., p. 50.

Ibid., p. 90.

Ibid., p. 85.

Ibid., p. 19.

Pearson, 'Peoples of the North', p. 27.

Pearson, Our Right, pp. 13 and 24.

Pearson, 'Peoples of the North', p. 27.

Pearson, 'White Guilt'.

Ibid, p. 17.
Elsewhere I have argued that progressive Australians must avoid victim-blaming in order to maintain the moral standing of Indigenous people as subjects deserving of help, and also to maintain their own moral standing as 'helpers' that want to assist Indigenous people to obtain their own chosen goals and not 'assimilate' them into Western culture. See Kowal and Paradies, 'Ambivalent Helpers'.

Pearson, *Our Right*, p. 93. Specifically, he argues that those who believe negative stereotypes of Indigenous people will stick to their views regardless of whether they are reinforced by discussion of Indigenous social dysfunction or not; that facing up to the social problems of Indigenous communities is more important than 'public relations'; and that there is no use denying problems 'which are patently obvious to outsiders'. Ibid., pp. 93–4.

For more information and evaluation reports see the Queensland government website http://www.frcq.org.au/.

In the Northern Territory, income management is where a part or all of welfare income is diverted to an account and can only be accessed using a special debit card at approved outlets that sell food, clothing and essential items. This is designed to stop welfare payments being used to purchase alcohol, drugs and other such items. Note that the question of whether responsibility can be promoted through such programs is distinct from the question of whether a lack of responsibility is a problem. The former is beyond the scope of this paper but is a significant issue in its own right.


Within Aboriginalist anthropology, a related debate concerning blame, cause and responsibility has continued for some time between Peter Sutton, an ally of Noel Pearson whose work has been a key factor in widening discussion of Aboriginal 'social dysfunction', and Gillian Cowlishaw, who is associated with the 'resistance model' of understanding socially deviant behaviours. See Ponsonnet; Cowlishaw; Sutton, 'Rage, Reason and the Honourable Cause'.

*The Subject of Responsibility*