

Cape York native title bid fuels feud between Noel Pearson and opponents

Federal government MP Warren Entsch and former Queensland MP David Kempton dismiss claim they are ‘manipulating’ Indigenous group over bid



A massive native title bid on Cape York has created a feud between Noel Pearson and opponents Warren Entsch and David Kempton. Photograph: Dave Hunt/AAP

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The targets of Noel Pearson’s claim that conservative political “puppeteers” are manipulating an Indigenous group to undermine a massive Cape York native title bid have rubbished the accusation.

In a speech in Brisbane on Monday, Pearson, an Indigenous lawyer and activist, likened federal government MP [Warren Entsch](#) and former Queensland government MP David Kempton to police who last century exploited “black trackers” to hold Aboriginal people captive in the way they were now “manipulating” opponents to the so-called “claim 1”.

Pearson accused Entsch, who he claimed was an ideological opponent of native title, and Kempton of using a body called Cape York Sustainable Futures to orchestrate opposition, via a related Indigenous group called the Cape York Alliance, to a claim on the remaining 52% of the peninsula not yet covered by native title.

Entsch and Kempton rejected Pearson’s comments on Wednesday, saying they were slurs that reflected Pearson’s frustration with dissent in cape communities over the way the claim was being run.

Entsch said Pearson was a “self-appointed leader” whose association with more than 20 private companies through which “hundreds of millions of [public] dollars are channelled every year for the ... people in Cape York” had led to growing resentment in communities, as some were still “dysfunctional”.

Kempton told Guardian Australia that Pearson and his associates were “sliding into denigration”.

Claim 1, which consolidates the native title claims of various Aboriginal nations of the cape in what Pearson said was an attempt to expedite the legal process from “20 years to five years”, is spearheaded by the Cape York land council, with which Pearson is strongly associated.

Kempton said that “nobody opposes claim 1, they just don’t want his land council running it”.

A Cape York alliance spokesman, Don de Busch, said the group spoke for traditional owners and elders who were concerned that the land council’s stewardship of “claim 1” would give Pearson’s clique leverage in negotiations over resource projects and other development on country that was not theirs.

De Busch said he supported native title for the cape but believed the legislation was “weak” as it gave traditional owners the right only to negotiate how the land was used.

The concern was that the land council was seeking “control over the resources and to be the gatekeeper over those negotiations”.



“We’ve got a huge investment coming through with the Northern [Australia] white paper; all of those things raise alarm bells,” he said.

The alliance has called for parliamentary inquiries into Cape York organisations, including the land council, and an end to the “utterly failed” welfare reforms pioneered by Pearson.

The chairman of the Cape York land council, Richie Ah Mat, did not return Guardian Australia’s call. However, he told the ABC in a statement that the claim had been run transparently, with more than 6,000 letters sent and meetings in 23 communities.

Kempton, a lawyer, said he had an “ongoing working relationship with Sustainable Futures” but the suggestion he was helping orchestrate Indigenous opposition to undermine the advance of land rights claims was “just rubbish”.

“I’m one of the most experienced practitioners of native title in Australia. I’ve been in the game since day one, negotiating outcomes,” he said. “I support claim 1.”

Entsch told ABC radio that it was characteristic of “Noelly” to be “full of vitriol and abuse – he’s got a very potty mouth when it comes to that” when he encountered opposition.

“I know [he] used that analogy about white troopers bringing on these silly blackfellas that don’t know what they’re doing,” he said.

“Mate, these ‘silly blackfellas’, as Noelly treats them with that level of contempt, all have names. They are in some cases elected leaders.”

Entsch said Pearson was “a self-appointed leader [who] has never stood for election but he has been effectively appointed by his mates in the south”.

“The former prime minister [Tony Abbott] called him a prophet. Now that was highly offensive to a lot of the popularly elected leaders up there. I think this was a catalyst for the formation of the Cape York Alliance.”

Entsch claimed that resentment in the cape had been “building for a long time” amid the growth of more than 20 companies, closely linked to Pearson and his associates, through which “hundreds of millions of [government] dollars are being channelled ... every year ... for ... Cape York people”.

“There are many, many people, many leaders in Cape York, elected leaders and many traditional owners, who are saying, ‘Hey, we are not seeing the benefit of this, they are not representing us,’ ” he said.

“In many cases when they ask to be seen by politicians and by former prime ministers, they haven’t even been able to get past the door, and yet [Noel Pearson](#) and his associates have free entry.”

Pearson said on Monday that Entsch and Kempton were “like the puppeteers through a white organisation called Cape York Sustainable Futures, then they’ve got a bunch of blackfellas fronting up under the banner of the Cape York Alliance”.

“[Entsch] is the federal MP for the one seat in the country that has the most amount of native title holders living in it, and yet he is the most steadfast opponent of the Mabo decision on native title.

“And he has managed to convince a rump group of blackfellas to oppose the claim.

“The caricature of manipulation that’s involved here is just so patent, that it’s amazing in 2015 that something like that can go on.

“And how could you have blackfellas opposing native title for blackfellas, for their own people?”