

Jewish leader's lessons showed Pearson the way

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Cape York leader Noel Pearson has spoken of his great love for his mentor Mark Leibler, the Jewish lawyer from Melbourne whose example taught him that indigenous Australians can resist victimhood even in the face of persistent racism and victimisation.

Mr Pearson recorded a speech that was played at the launch of Michael Gawenda's biography of Australia's most powerful Jewish leader on Monday. Mr Pearson told the audience: "I love and respect this man."

Mr Pearson was a young law graduate when he met Mr Leibler in the Collins Street offices of the famous firm Arnold Block Leibler, where Mr Leibler has been a partner for almost 50 years.

The Jerusalem Post has described Mr Leibler as one of the world's 50 most influential Jews.

Mr Pearson said the Jewish model of perseverance, dedication and success that it represents had been a beacon and "something that is a model for my own thinking about our predicament as indigenous Australians and how it is that we might turn our parlous lot around".

"The first lesson I learned from our Jewish community and its leaders like Mark is the imperative to be vigilant against racism ...



Pearson

no people are more keenly aware how dangerous the virus of racism can be," he said. "The second thing I learned from the Jewish community and from Mark in particular is that whilst the Jewish people have long been victimised, they have never succumbed to victimhood. And that paradox really seized me."

Gawenda's book, *The Power-broker: Mark Leibler, an Australian Jewish Life*, includes a cast of high-profile Australians — among them Paul Keating, John Howard and Julia Gillard — who came to know Mr Leibler and to call him a friend. Others, including Kevin Rudd and Bob Carr, see Mr Leibler as no friend at all.

The book charts what Monash University Publishing describes as a surprise turn in Mr Leibler's life "when a social and political conservative became a committed advocate for a radical reform on behalf of Australia's indigenous people".

Mr Pearson said the Jewish community's steadfast defiance,

self-reliance and determination to prevail made him think about how his own people could, in the full illumination of the truth of history, turn their eyes to the future.

"According to the example I have seen, we will be able to as indigenous Australians maintain our religious and spiritual identity with our culture and homelands while engaging in the wider world," Mr Pearson said. "In Cape York I began to talk about our children having a future from Cape York to New York. That is the future I envisage for the young people of my community."

"We should be able to keep a strong spiritual base in our homes whilst at the same time, like the Jews, engage in the wider world according to our talents and our preferences."

Mr Pearson said the most important lesson from Mr Leibler and other Jewish leaders was about identity. They showed him that it was possible for an indigenous person to be a member of their "tribe" and citizens in the wider world.

"The assimilationists would have us believe that we should ditch all the tribal stuff and just become citizens," he said.

"I think the equally wrong approach is to think we are just members of our tribe."

"We are both and we should feel that it is our right and our entitlement to have the best of both worlds."