

---

## Look back on anger

*Courier Mail, The*  
Saturday, October 9, 1999  
Author: Tony Koch

MURRANDOO Yanner is an irreverent chap, unfettered by pomp or protocol.

When I spoke by telephone to him early yesterday, he said the media had been on to him since daybreak, and he'd ``only had time for a dingo's breakfast''.

I asked what was a dingo's breakfast, and he replied: ``A piss and a look around, brother.''

An initiated man of the Gunnamulla clan of the Gungahatta tribe, Yanner is the angry young voice of Aboriginal Australia. To his own people, he is a champion who takes on the oppressive white establishment \_ and wins.

After Thursday's High Court ruling, he is again telling white authorities exactly where they could get off. In a five/two decision, the High Court justices found that Yanner had the right to spear crocodiles for food for his family even though they are a species protected by law.

The culling of crocodiles was banned a decade or more ago, and the numbers are now at dangerous levels in northern waterways. That aside, the law says they should not be killed. But Yanner lives in a remote part of the state. His people have taken and eaten these animals for centuries. Of course they should be allowed to eat them.

One can only speculate why police ever pressed the charges, and why, when the magistrate threw the case out as obvious nonsense, the Queensland Government directed that it be referred to the Court of Appeal. Yet again, more than \$100,000 has been spent lining the pockets of lawyers \_ in a futile attempt to put a stop to an articulate Aboriginal man who fights for his people, and who is a thorn in the side of politicians, and to a lesser extent, police.

Politicians \_ particularly from the National Party \_ who have been frustrated by Yanner in his dealings over mining issues and native title, despise him. Queensland's former Labor premier Wayne Goss had no time at all for Yanner, and Premier Peter Beattie has clashed with him. However, the two are to meet at Lawn Hill Gorge in a few weeks to sort out their differences.

In 1994, when Yanner was charged by police over taking the crocodiles, an MP distributed among journalists a document critical of Yanner. It claimed he had a poor academic record at school ``and anyway his real name is Jason''.

His birth name is Jason, and for a short time he was employed as an ABC radio journalist. He was also a handy amateur lightweight boxer, is full of anger and will say whatever comes into his head.

When one politician insisted on calling him by his birthname of Jason on the radio in an apparent attempt to demean the fact that Yanner had gone through an Aboriginal initiation process and taken the tribal name of Murrandoo, Yanner stopped him in his tracks. He said if the politician wanted to embark on a name-calling exercise, he would reveal why that particular person was known in certain same-sex circles as ``Bubbles". He has been referred to as Murrandoo ever since.

Yanner is no fool, and anybody who makes that judgment will pay the price. Even in places like Redfern in Sydney, when he walks down a street he is mobbed by locals like some pop star.

But the most impressive thing is to observe him among his own people on communities. He is at home sitting down under a tree, smoke in hand, talking. He defers to the community elders, and is absolutely respectful \_ and expects everybody else to give them the same honour.

Unlike many other Aboriginal leaders, Yanner chooses to live among his people in Burketown with his New-Guinea-born wife and four sons. As chairman of his land council he is paid a salary of \$30,000 \_ and is smart enough to ensure that every cent that goes through the council is accounted for in an appropriate manner. Not for him the trap of many of his black brothers who face accusations of having fingers in the till.

Yanner was the first indigenous leader to speak last year about the unspeakable issue of violence and alcoholism in Aboriginal communities. He had the courage to blast the black-on-black policy where Aboriginal legal services decided they would not represent victims of crime (eg wives, children, girlfriends) where the perpetrator was also an indigenous person.

YANNER said grog was turning ``warriors into wife-bashers", and he demanded that action be taken against those males who persisted in the sexual abuse of young children.

Yanner's land council consulted on the issue, and provided funds for a lawyer to take up the case of indigenous crime victims. As the cases are settled, the advance given to the lawyer is refunded.

But that sort of action typifies Yanner \_ he gets things done, and doesn't just sit around talking about them.

One must wonder about his future. It is one thing to be a firebrand, but he is capable of much greater achievement than that for his people.

At the moment Yanner is satisfied to be the angry voice, and leave the intellectual debate to the likes of Noel Pearson and Aden Ridgeway. But the time is fast

approaching when he has to broaden his horizons from Burketown and the Gulf, and paint on the big canvas.

In December last year he hosted a trip to Burketown and Doomadgee by the sons of murdered South African apartheid fighter, Steve Biko, to show them the appalling conditions under which Aboriginal people in Australia live today.

Hlumelo Biko said the communities were ``barbaric" and that he'd never seen people living in such atrocious conditions. He added, rather ominously, that the poorest street dweller in Soweto had a better life than a black person at Doomadgee.

So, there are certainly bigger issues to fight \_ bigger crocs to spear \_ for Murrandoo Yanner.

His win this week was more than it appears on the surface.

In 1994 when he was arrested, he gave an interview in which he said he was pleased to take on the issue because he wanted to vindicate his elderly uncle, Herbert Walden, who in 1984 was charged with shooting protected plains turkeys and taking them home to his wife and children to eat. Walden too appealed to the High Court, but lost.

Yesterday, Yanner said his victory was a vindication for ``Uncle Herbie".

Yanner has a great deal to offer not only his own people, but Australia as a whole.

He can advance an argument, and win. He has shown his fighting spirit. He has won great victories. He now has to transfer those abilities, that spirit, that passion to the greater good of all his people.

Then he will have made his mark.

In last week's column I wrote about a man driving a car into a group of people at Burketown and severely injuring a bystander. The driver's name was Daniel Booth, not Donald as was reported.

[kocht@qnp.newsltd.com.au](mailto:kocht@qnp.newsltd.com.au)