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Sugar Ray's bitterness

By Greg Roberts
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Rivalry over government funding and political power has spilled over into a nasty brawl in outback Queensland. Greg Roberts reports.

ONE of Australia's most powerful Aboriginal leaders points to a patch of dry mulga scrub outside the south-west Queensland town of Charleville. "That's where I grew up as a kid; that's where the tin shed was," says "Sugar" Ray Robinson, deputy chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). "It had a dirt floor; eight of us lived there. We carted water in a bucket from a tap every day. We ate bread and water with sugar sprinkled on it. There wasn't a day went past that I wasn't hungry."

Robinson, 56, has come a long way. Today he heads the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services Secretariat and 13 other indigenous bodies. A powerbroker in ATSIC, he is a constant thorn in the side of the commission chairman, Geoff Clark.

Robinson predicts that after the October 19 ATSIC elections, Clark will no longer be chairman. "Geoff Clark has a problem and the problem is he is not going to get in as chairman while I'm there," he booms in his trademark gravelly voice. "He hasn't got the numbers. He knows that if he's ever to get back as chairman, I'm his biggest threat."

Robinson insists he does not covet the top job. Clark infuriated Robinson recently when he called for an investigation into allegations against his deputy in a series of articles in Brisbane's *The Courier-Mail* newspaper.

Clark had not forgotten that when he faced allegations last year of raping four women between 1971 and 1983 in western Victoria, which he denies, Robinson suggested he stand aside until they were "dealt with". Clark's supporters have pointed out that Robinson was convicted of rape and jailed in 1963 when he was 17; Robinson has described his conviction as a "great injustice". Robinson spent two years in jail on a second rape count between 1989 and 1991 but was released when a retrial found him not guilty.

Robinson won't discuss the charges these days and is reluctant to pass judgement on the Clark allegations: "I don't really know enough about them." But the intense animosity between ATSIC's top leaders is no longer a secret. "He doesn't like me and I don't like him," says Robinson.

The redoubtable Robinson, a former boxer, has endured a tumultuous 30 years of indigenous politics. Several investigations into allegations of impropriety against him Federal Police have raided his Charleville offices in the past have failed to establish wrongdoing. "They haven't found anything because I don't raid the till," Robinson says.

Now, however, with ATSIC elections looming, Robinson is under extraordinary pressure. He faces a Federal Police probe into his use of travel funds paid by ATSIC and other bodies. ATSIC has asked him to provide receipts to back up more than \$48,000 in travel payments. The commission is also reviewing the national legal service he chairs.

Robinson claims a campaign is under way to undermine him before the elections: "Aboriginal people are the most jealous people in the world. But people have to ask why, in this community in Charleville, everything is working while in other communities, nothing is working."

Charleville's Bidjara community certainly appears to be working. The Bidjara Housing and Land Company, which Robinson heads, is the umbrella entity for local indigenous enterprises ranging from a radio station, panel-beating workshop and car sales dealership, to a hostel and four pastoral properties.

"This community is on the verge of economic independence," Robinson says. "We've provided 250 jobs. Any Aborigine who wants a job here gets one. Crime problems have dropped 30 per cent. There aren't any racial problems in this town black and white work together. Noel Pearson has been talking about the need for this for years, but we're actually doing it."

Graham Andrews, the manager of Charleville's RSL Club, says Robinson is widely respected in the town. "He's tried to achieve economic independence for his people to get them off government handouts," Andrews says. In Reconciliation the Charleville Way, an ATSIC-funded video which sings Robinson's praises, the former federal Aboriginal affairs minister, John Herron, says Charleville's example should be followed around Australia.

The value of some projects is not immediately obvious. A large dam has been bulldozed in the mulga to attract wildlife near the planned Lost City Bush Camp; it is empty and has been dubbed "Lake Leak" by detractors. Bidjara will hold a 25 per cent stake in the \$10 million Cosmos Stargazing Centre being built near Charleville's airport. "It's an amazing idea," Robinson says.

Robinson's critics say Charleville thrives because funds are plentiful. Groups headed by Robinson received ATSIC funds totalling \$7.2 million in 1999-00; some service southern Queensland centres outside Charleville. Robinson rejects suggestions of a conflict of interest between being ATSIC's deputy chief and heading so many groups receiving ATSIC funding.

The chief executive of one group chaired by Robinson, the Queensland South Representative Body Aboriginal Corporation, is Gerry Hand, a former federal Labor Aboriginal affairs minister. Bidjara's chief executive, Peter Alexander, is also non-indigenous. Bidjara's office complex in the main street of Charleville has been dubbed "the White House" by Robinson's detractors, but he rejects suggestions he should employ more indigenous senior staff. "I appoint people who want to do the work ... I've probably got more white mates than black mates."

Robinson's critics claim ATSIC funding for the region has been concentrated in Charleville at the expense of other communities. Visually, Charleville shines in comparison with Cunnamulla, its poor cousin 200 kilometres to the south, which has a much bigger indigenous population. "We get zilch because we've fallen out with Sugar," says Wayne Wharton, of the Cunnamulla-based South-West Queensland Aboriginal Co-Operative. "Our co-op is \$450,000 in debt. We operate in an

environment of fear and favour." A respected Cunnamulla elder, Hazel McKellar, agrees. "Charleville's got everything; we have trouble getting anything," she says.

The Cunnamulla-based Warrego Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) has been told by ATSIC following a review that its operations had been suspended from last Monday and would be taken over by the Bidjara CDEP, which Robinson heads, from next Tuesday. "Charleville and Sugar already have the legal services and housing here under their control and now they're taking over the CDEP," says Robert Hammond, the Warrego CDEP chairman.

John Mitchell, a supervisor with Warrego, says most of the 100 participants in the CDEP program will refuse to transfer to Bidjara. "They won't be stood over by Sugar," Mitchell says. "They'll go back on social security. All the crime and alcohol problems will come back."

East of Charleville, Bob Munn, of the Nalingu Aboriginal Corporation in the town of Mitchell, says his organisation received just \$58,000 from ATSIC this year. "It's bugger all. We haven't even got \$30 a week to clean the office with," he says. "Everything gets channelled to Charleville."

Robinson's "enemies", as he calls them, include members of his family. His cousin, Pat Fraser, heads a rival bid for a land claim over a cattle property which Robinson's Bidjara group has pursued. "We had funding for our bid from the land council stopped," Fraser says. "There is a saying around: 'If you're not sugar-coated, you're nothing.'"

Robinson says funding to the Warrego CDEP was stopped because the ATSIC review found financial management problems 50 payments could not be verified due to lack of documentation. Robinson says many communities throughout the region not just Charleville benefit from Bidjara's success. As for his cousin, "I have got by far the biggest mob of support in the Bidjara nation."

Robinson says the high vote he gets in elections suggests he is on the right path: "Look at Cunnamulla and all the money that's been poured into it over the years. What have they got to show for it? Nothing. It all gets down to good leadership. They haven't got the leadership."

Robinson says a fellow ATSIC councillor, Stephen Hagan, of Toowoomba, is spearheading the campaign to undermine him because Hagan wants to replace him as ATSIC commissioner for the Queensland South region.

Hagan, an ATSIC regional councillor with a postgraduate economics degree, is best known for his failed legal attempts to force Toowoomba's Nigger Brown football stadium and Coon Cheese to change their names. Hagan doesn't deny he would like to see Robinson toppled: "It's not fair that one area gets the lion's share of funds and others put up with Third World conditions."