

Warren Mundine: 18C puts freedom of speech at risk



Warren Mundine. Picture: David Swift.

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- BY JOE KELLY

Warren Mundine has pushed for immediate and decisive action to overhaul section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act which he argues has “overstepped the line.”

Following notice of an 18C investigation against *The Australian* and its cartoonist Bill Leak, the head of the Prime Minister’s indigenous Advisory Council told Sky News today there was a risk national debate on important subjects like child abuse was being stifled and creating deep social frustrations.

He also argued the operation of section 18C was not contributing to racial harmony but was instead acting as a force of social division and argued that Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party was reaping the political dividends.

“We’re looking at freedom of speech in this country, looking at being able to debate serious issues like the Bill Leak cartoon which, yes, was in your face. It was meant to be in your face,” he said. “But it was about raising a very serious issue about child abuse.

“If people are going to be hauled before tribunals or courts over these very issues, it is going to stifle debate. It is going to stop freedom of speech and I believe it has to be reformed.

“It is raising the heart in regard to race relations,” Mr Mundine said. “We’ve seen the rise of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and that was borne out by the frustrations of people. I know people, friends of mine, non-indigenous friends and that, who don’t say what they would like to say because they’ve said it a couple of times and they’ve been abused and attacked and threatened.

“That’s why you start to see in the polling booths the changes that are happening there. There is a lot frustration.”

In the cartoon subject to the 18C action, an indigenous uniformed Northern Territory police officer presents an indigenous youth to his father in an outback setting and says to the father: “You’ll have to sit down and talk to your son about personal responsibility.”

The indigenous father, who is holding a can of beer, replies: “Yeah righto, what’s his name then?”

The investigation was triggered by complainant Melissa Dinnison who says she experienced “racial hatred” and been discriminated against as a result of the cartoon.

Mr Mundine said it was critical “immediate action” should be taken after Malcolm Turnbull gave succour to calls for a parliamentary committee to examine the nation’s racial vilification laws and make recommendations.

The Prime Minister confirmed on Friday the push for an inquiry, as proposed by Liberal Senator Dean Smith, was being considered by the government.

“It’s a right step,” he said. “But immediate action does need to be done in this area.”

“All we’re going to see is a lot more suffering and a lot more silencing during this period. I think it’s a no brainer.”

Labor workplace relations spokesman Brendan O’Connor said he had not followed the issue closely, but he would wait to see the outcome of the investigation before passing judgment on whether changes to racial discrimination laws were needed.

“It’s very hard to attack the efficacy of the system until we see what decision is made and the reasons upon which that decision was made in so far as Bill Leak is concerned,” he told Sky News.