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## NO COMPROMISE

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Author: David Nason

*The new macho man of Aboriginal politics is in no mood to kowtow to a government he believes has betrayed his people, report Stuart Rintoul and David Nason. But will Geoff Clark's radicalism inspire -- or hobble -- the struggle for Aboriginal rights?*

GEOFF Clark is a ginger-haired, blue-eyed Aboriginal radical, the pug-faced son of a wharfie, who fought as a teenage tent boxer and briefly as a heavyweight boxer. When he smiles, which is not often, it is a fearsome sight.

As the first elected chairman of the beleaguered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, it will be the face of Geoff Clark that shares much of the spotlight with Aboriginal Senator Aden Ridgeway as world attention inevitably focuses on Australia's treatment of its indigenous people in the lead-up to next year's Sydney Olympics.

It is not a prospect that gives the Government any comfort.

With Aboriginal leaders increasingly talking about the need to turn up the political heat, Clark has already fired a shot across John Howard's bow, warning that while he hoped for constructive relations with the Government there was "a major difference between addressing our economic and social disadvantage [Howard's agenda] and full recognition of our rights as the First Nations of Australia."

At his home in the Aboriginal community of Framlingham, near Warrnambool in Western Victoria, Henry "Banjo" Clarke, the Uncle Banjo of Archie Roach's song *Weeping in the Forest*, is watching television, watching his nephew, Geoff Clark, talk about his new role.

Although he might have been expected to have rejoiced in his nephew's rise to one of the most powerful Aboriginal positions in the nation, Uncle Banjo, an elder of the Gunditjmarra people, who was born in a bark hut and is old enough to have seen the last of "the old full-bloods" die out, is unimpressed.

"Big shot," he says contemptuously. "He's got no Aboriginal identity, he's got no feelings for [Aborigines]."

Turning to what he thinks is the cause of the anger that seems to accompany Clark everywhere, he says: "I was the fellow what brought him home from Melbourne when he was a little boy and nobody wanted him."

In Canberra, settling into his new office overlooking the Brindabellas, Clark dismisses his uncle's attack as a "historical blue between the family", accentuated by a recent court action. "Typical blackfella stuff," he says.

But he is clearly wounded by the reference to his upbringing. The son of a white wharfie and an Aboriginal mother, who said this week his fair skin meant that he had "always copped it about my colour", Clark was raised by his grandmother, Alice Clark, whom he calls "one of the most important people in my life". He says he is close to his mother despite the strife of his youth. His father, Geoff Macintosh, died about 10 years ago.

"He split with my mother, I'm not exactly sure when, but they had a good relationship even though they never got married. It was one of those relationships that was their private business, but I used to see him all the time. He looked after me and so did she."

Did his mother give him up as a child? "No," he says flatly. "Aboriginal tradition, mate. The stability was at Framlingham -- kinship, family networks and that -- and I was raised in the communal sense. My mother did not give me up. What happened to me happens to every second Aboriginal person, I think."

Clark brings with him into the ATSIC chair a radical perspective. A member of several delegations that have sought to draw UN attention to "the erosion of indigenous rights in Australia", 18 months ago, in the wake of One Nation's success in the Queensland election, he was arguing for an international boycott of the Sydney Olympics and overseas trade sanctions against Australia.

In August 1990, as a member of Michael Mansell's self-styled Provisional Aboriginal Government, which had sought support for Aboriginal sovereignty from terrorist Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammarr Gaddafi, Clark was arrested in Darwin for trying to enter Australia on an Aboriginal passport.

It has earned him serious distrust from the Howard Government, which has been far from effusive about the changing of ATSIC's guard from the urbane and traditional Gatjil Djerrkura, to the urban and unpredictable Clark. Within ATSIC, Clark's opponents say they fear the organisation would become "erratic".

Charles Perkins, beaten for the chairmanship and what would have been a remarkable political comeback after a swap of preferences between Clark and Djerrkura, laughs when he is asked what he thinks Clark's relationship with Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Herron will be.

Indigenous Land Corporation head Sharon Firebrace, a Howard appointee, says she hopes Clarke will "rein in" his international activism and be prepared to accept that both ATSIC and the Federal Government need to improve their performance.

"It's no good saying all the problems are the white man's fault, the white government's fault," says Firebrace. "ATSIC has been in partnership with government for 10 years now, so we have to take some of the responsibility for what's gone on."

Clark won the chairmanship of ATSIC because of a preference swap with former chairman Djerrkura, coming through between the two big players Djerrkura and Perkins. After the opening primary count, Perkins had six of the 17 votes, Clark five, Djerrkura four and the Cairns-based Jenny Pryor two.

Pryor's preferences went one each to Perkins and Clark, which left Djerrkura out of the race but his preferences deciding the outcome.

Clark's deal with Djerrkura held. He received three of Djerrkura's four preferences, with the last one not allocated. The end result was a 9-7 win to Clark over Perkins.

So low is the store of confidence in ATSIC in much of black Australia that Clark's unexpected win -- some called it breathtaking -- has been widely accepted in the Aboriginal leadership. Some believe it is the last gasp for a largely unpopular organisation that has been stripped of significant funding responsibility and authority and that is likely to be stripped of more. ATSIC's inaugural chairwoman Lowitja O'Donoghue welcomes Clark's election, saying that although he may not be popular with the Federal Government, "he is a good strong advocate for us and he won't be backward in speaking out".

Northern Land Council chairman Galarrwuy Yunupingu says Clark has spent much of his life fighting for Aboriginal issues. "Geoff is a man who speaks his mind and will bring his tenacious spirit to the job," he says. Former Aboriginal social justice commissioner Mick Dodson, who has worked closely with Clark in the international arena for many years, welcomes his election and describes him as "a great advocate for indigenous rights".

Sydney magistrate Pat O'Shane is more circumspect, saying she hopes Clark will "take the opportunity to make history for himself and for ATSIC" by developing policy and programs to attack Aboriginal disadvantage.

"On his record, I would say he will find it very difficult to do that," she says. "But this is an opportunity he has not had before and I would hope that he would think very seriously about making quite a change." O'Shane says she thinks Aborigines are "reaping the whirlwind" of a leadership that was courted and seduced by the Keating government, then rejected by Howard, and that a new era of confrontation between Aborigines and government is now inevitable.

The relationship between Ridgeway and Clark may be pivotal in how black Australia addresses international attention next year. While Ridgeway says the two have a "good rapport", there are also many differences between them.

Clark, at his first press conference, said his priority would be a political campaign for more land rights. Ridgeway says he believes Clark's main aim should be better service delivery in depressed Aboriginal communities: "He's certainly a strong advocate of rights issues -- it's now a case of dealing with that as well as [ATSIC's] service provision."

In last month's republic referendum, Ridgeway advocated a yes vote after crafting reference to Aboriginal kinship with the land into Howard's proposed constitutional preamble. The hardline Clark was among Aboriginal leaders who advocated a no vote.

Ridgeway is opposed to an Aboriginal boycott of the Sydney Olympics, along with many Aboriginal leaders who believe it would be counterproductive. Clark said of the Olympics earlier this year: "What a perfect opportunity for people to protest."

While Ridgeway is a polished black advocate, Clark says he was educated in the "school of hard knocks". The new head of the \$900 million black bureaucracy ended his formal education after Year 11 at Warrnambool Technical College when he was 17. In Perth in the 1970s, he took his knocks in the ring, fighting "seven or eight" professional bouts as a heavyweight. He says he won more than he lost, but that it was "never a career option".

Prison officer John Stokes recalls playing football with Clark in post-Cyclone Tracy Darwin. He remembered him yesterday as a "terrific bloke" and a fearsome athlete.

"Back then, Darwin was a place where you were either working, playing footy or pissed, and Clarkie fitted in real well," he says.

"The nastier the footy got, the bigger the smile on his face."

Stokes says that in Darwin's rough-and-tumble pubs of the period, Clark carried with him the reputation of someone not to be messed with. With Clark preparing for the fight of his life, against Howard, his former team-mate concludes: "There was always a sense that if you pulled this bloke's tail, you would have a handful."