

Leaders hurting blacks: Mundine

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Warren Mundine is respected, articulate and intelligent. So why has the indigenous leader shunned the nation's peak indigenous organisation, ATSIC, to eye off Labor's national presidency?

Suspicious about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission from its inception, he says its leadership has handed the federal Government the ammunition to abolish the commission.

Mr Mundine, who has won the backing of the ALP's powerful Right faction to run against left-wing dissident Carmen Lawrence, said yesterday Aboriginal leaders needed to "look in the mirror" over their current woes.

"Some of the people we elected have tended to put themselves above what was best for the Aboriginal community -- we've seen that clearly with commissioners at the moment," he says.

"I have concerns about the future of ATSIC because the Government has always wanted to dismantle it, but the Aboriginal leadership gave the Government the ammunition to get rid of them." This is quintessential Mundine -- a man who speaks his mind, even when it doesn't make him popular.

In the words of one associate: "He's not a fence-sitter. People like him because he speaks his mind. But because he lets them know where he stands, that also means people can disagree with him." Warren Stephen Mundine's life has four pillars: his Aboriginality, the church, the labour movement and family. Labor politics were imbued by his old man, Roy, whose union won him a full wage in the 1940s, rather than the pittance paid to indigenous workers. His mother, Dolly, was a devout Catholic who ensured her kids got Marist educations.

Born ninth into a family of 11, Mr Mundine, 47, has seven kids of his own -- two from a previous relationship, four with his wife of 20 years, Lynette Riley-Mundine, and one adopted. Broader family is also important: he was there to cheer on his cousin, boxer Anthony Mundine, at last night's fight. His first political mentor was an Aboriginal woman in Armidale named Pat Dixon, who felt indigenous people would advance only if they tackled mainstream politics. Mr Mundine followed her lead (she was a deputy mayor) and became a Dubbo city councillor. In 2001 he was preselected by Labor for their third Senate seat but lost after the Tampa asylum-seeker issue exploded.

Now he has his eyes on leading the federal Labor Party's 50,000 rank-and-file as their president but still has longer term ambitions for parliament.

Unlike Dr Lawrence, who quit the front bench over Labor's asylum-seeker policy, Mr Mundine backs the party's position without reservation.

Longtime friend Linda Burney, a NSW state Labor MP, says Mr Mundine is a "big, loud friendly guy who lives and breathes politics". But Ms Burney, who signed Dr Lawrence's nominations, has divided loyalties. "It's really important that a woman lead our party," she says. "But, of course, I will be supporting Warren as well."